





Blue Ribbon Task Force to be formed

The McKinley County Board of Commissioners voted 2-1 March 14 to support a resolution related to the gathering of more information about the environmental impact of uranium mining.

That was the outcome of a regular county commission meeting whereby area community members asked the county to not entertain notions about uranium mining.

Commissioners Carol Bowman-Muskett and Bill Lee voted in favor of the resolution.

Commissioner Genevieve Jackson opposed it on the grounds that some new detail should be included in a new resolution. Bowman-Musket and Lee suggested that passing a moratorium could land McKinley County in legal and financial hot water.

“If we pass a moratorium, do we know what the legal ramifications are,” Lee asked. “I’m suggesting we hold off on that and at least hold more public meetings.”

A similar input meeting was held in January and members of the community again asked the county to not move ahead with any ideas pertaining to uranium development. Leading up to the January meeting, various groups asked the county to come up with a policy that would pause potential uranium mining and evaluate community risks and safety measures.

At this week’s meeting, which lasted about two hours, public comment favored the adopting of a moratorium as opposed to furthering another resolution. At the end, though, those who spoke and the Board of Commissioners agreed on the formation of the Blue Ribbon Task Force – the hopes of which the two sides believe might yield some consensus.

McKinley County Attorney Doug Decker said several of those present from the public would be part of the committee along with McKinley County Manager Anthony Dimas. “It’s very preliminary right now,” Decker said of the committee formation. “But the task force itself will be formed and will begin holding meetings very soon.”

The meeting was, in essence, a special meeting called to follow up on a previous and similar resolution from Jan. 3. The meeting was called after an apparent state Open Meetings Act violation relevant to the January meeting.

“It’s good that the commissioners listened to us today,” Mitchell Capitan of Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining, said. “The problems that were brought forward at the meeting are ones that we have been working on for a long time. We are also worried about water contamination, especially in the Crownpoint community. I hope that moving forward they (county commissioners) reconsider the moratorium and make the resolution stronger.”

A local resident who works with community groups on the issue weighed in.

“It’s not the victory that we wanted but it’s a small steep in the right direction,” Janene Yazzie said. “We need continued public support to hold our commissioners accountable, in writing, a formal agreement and another county resolution that establishes the task force.”

Teracity Keyanna of the Red Water Pond Road Association spoke out about the contamination dangers of uranium.

“We would like to see the county commissioners be champions for our children,” Keyanna said. “In our community, we have 30 to 40 students who go to school in Gallup that are impacted by the uranium mines that weren’t cleaned up properly. We want the county to establish a dialogue between the communities most impacted and county government so that we can establish real solutions. Our children are our future. We need to do this for them.”

A local, outspoken activist thought the meeting was a starting point in the uranium discussion.

“I though the meeting was OK,” Mervyn Tilden, a self-identified activist from Church Rock, said. “We still did not have reps from the uranium companies here. Everybody should be brought to the table. The formation of the task force is a step in the right direction.”

Steve Verchinski, a former McKinley County employee said, “We want to see New Mexico be a peace state. We need to keep uranium in the ground.”

Decker said since this week’s meeting only pertained to supporting the various’ efforts, a new resolution or a moratorium ordinance would have to be done at a separate county meeting.

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