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## BLM authorizes Grand Canyon uranium exploration

Eric Bontrager, E&E reporter

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The Bureau of Land Management has authorized several new uranium exploration permits near the Grand Canyon despite a congressional resolution last year barring new claims near the national park.

According to documents released yesterday by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Grand Canyon Trust, BLM on April 27 authorized Quaterra Alaska Inc. to conduct eight uranium mine exploration operations at five separate projects north of Grand Canyon National Park and west of the Kaibab Plateau.

“Our understanding is that exploration can begin immediately,” said Taylor McKinnon, director of CBD’s public lands program.

Quaterra Alaska is a subsidiary of Vancouver-based Quaterra Resources Inc.

All of the projects are within the 1 million acres of BLM and Forest Service land that the House Natural Resources Committee ordered to be withdrawn from new uranium mining claims in June 2008, according to the groups.

The committee employed its rarely used emergency declaration authority to withdraw the lands, but then-Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne rejected the panel’s request, saying the committee did not have a quorum on the vote, which was taken after Republicans walked out

in protest, arguing that there was no emergency to prompt the move (E&E Daily, June 26, 2008).

The department also disputed the committee’s authority under the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act to issue emergency withdrawals and later issued a new rule that limited its ability to carry out such orders.

Michael Taylor, deputy director of resources at BLM’s Arizona state office, disputed the groups’ claims that this action authorized new drilling operations.

He explained that the documents reflect the company’s shift in reclamation bond funds from one set of exploration sites that the company was no longer interested in exploring to the new set of sites that were not previously bonded. “It was a transfer of bonding money between the notices,” Taylor said. “There is no on-the-ground exploration authorized.”

Describing the action as a “paper shuffle,” Taylor said the company has not given any indication that it plans to explore the newly bonded sites and that the agency has not authorized any new exploration permits. “We haven’t done anything out there, anything that would be contrary to what the committee had requested,” he said.

But Richard Mayol, director of communications and government affairs for the Grand Canyon Trust, said the transfer still constitutes a new authorization. “The fact they shifted

the bonding to these sites means they can begin this exploration drilling,” he said.

The trust and CBD, along with the Sierra Club, filed a lawsuit against Interior last fall to force it to comply with the committee’s order (E&ENews PM, Sept. 29, 2008).

While the case has yet to go to court, McKinnon said the groups were not informed of BLM’s authorizations, and that he was unsure how they would affect the lawsuit.

Earlier this year, Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) reintroduced legislation to bar uranium development near the Grand Canyon, noting that new mining near the park could contaminate regional water systems (E&E Daily, Jan. 23).

Grijalva had introduced the legislation last year but faced serious opposition from Bush administration officials and Republicans, who said the bill would hurt local economies, prompting the Arizona Democrat to push for the committee’s emergency withdrawal.

He said in January that he would work to convince Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to reconsider the temporary withdrawal while he pushes his legislation. Salazar has not spoken publicly about the issue since taking office.

“This is an indication that the BLM needs leadership from the new administration,” said CBD’s McKinnon. “The Grand Canyon example highlights the need for change.”