

But two federal agencies are at odds over wastewater injections

# Wyoming moves ahead on uranium permits

By DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER - Star-Tribune energy reporter | Posted: Friday, April 16, 2010

\* To view the draft permit, go to [deq.state.wy.us/wqd/events/index.asp](http://deq.state.wy.us/wqd/events/index.asp).

\* Additional information on this case may be obtained by calling George Langstaff at (307) 777-2960 or sending email to [glangs@wyo.gov](mailto:glangs@wyo.gov).

Be heard

\* Public comments will be accepted through April 26. Comments should be in writing and addressed to the UIC Program, Water Quality Division; Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality; Herschler Building, 4W; 122 W. 25th St.; Cheyenne, WY 82002.

What is in-situ?

\* The in-situ method of mining uranium involves a series of wells used to flush a sodium bicarbonate solution through a formation dissolving the uranium, which is then pumped to the surface.

Wyoming regulators are proceeding with permits allowing uranium developers to inject wastewater underground despite concerns by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's one step in the regulatory process that's being completed. We have a lot of permits we have to obtain. But this is good news," said Wayne Heili, vice president of mining for Ur Energy.

The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality recently issued a draft permit that would allow five underground injection wells at Ur Energy's proposed Lost Creek in-situ uranium mine in Sweetwater County. The agency is accepting public comments on the draft permit through April 26.

But an objection by the EPA could hold up federal certification of that project and two others in Wyoming.

Carol Rushin, acting regional administrator of EPA's Region 8 office, recently criticized the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission's analysis for each project because that agency considered only one wastewater disposal method: deep "Class I" injection wells. Lost Creek developers propose to inject wastewater from the operation to a depth of about 8,400 feet, above both the Tensleep and the Madison aquifers.

Rushin noted that the Safe Drinking Water Act requires that Class I wastes be injected below the lowermost underground source of drinking water, which she said would present a major hurdle for dozens of proposed in-situ uranium projects in the region.

If so, it may also pose a challenge for potential carbon sequestration projects.

But state regulators and Ur Energy officials say that while the Madison aquifer may be considered a drinking water source elsewhere in the state, it's not a potential drinking water source in the Great Divide Basin where the injections would take place.

"We don't consider the formation to be a potential drinking water source within the area of the mine operation. We simply don't have any concern that it's going to impact any existing or future drinking water supplies," said Kevin Frederick, manager of the groundwater section of the DEQ's Water Quality Division.

Moreover, the Madison formation in the Great Divide Basin is geologically isolated from the Madison in northeast Wyoming where the cities of Gillette and Moorcroft tap the formation for drinking water, Heili said.

"Our application for our Class I wells addresses the concerns that the EPA raised in a scientific and technical way, and it demonstrates these formations are not drinking water sources in areas where we are going to operate," Heili said.

Both the Wyoming Outdoor Council and the Powder River Basin Resource Council submitted written comments to the NRC saying there's not enough evidence to be sure the wastewater injections won't migrate and infiltrate other drinking water sources in the Great Divide Basin.

Meanwhile, the NRC is working closely with EPA staff members to address that agency's concerns.

"We plan to respond formally to EPA's letter in May or June. In the meantime, we have been considering their comments while finalizing the (supplemental environmental impact statements)," NRC public affairs officer David McIntyre told the Star-Tribune via e-mail.

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