

Vermont Environmental Report

The Vermont Legislature

Review...

Uranium Exploration, Mining, Milling - H.327

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Legislation that would require approval by the General Assembly of any prospecting on state land and the mining or processing of ore for nuclear fission fuels on state and private land has been introduced by Rep. Michael Silver, R-Bennington. Bill H.327 is being reviewed by the House Natural Resources Committee.

For the most part, House bill H.327 is in response to a request from the West German mining firm, Urangesellschaft, for permission to explore state lands, principally Okemo State Park, for uranium deposits. Urangesellschaft and other mining companies have already obtained leases for some 2000 acres of privately owned land. The leases, according to state Environmental Agency sources, includes exploration and mining rights.

Rep. William Hunter (D-Windsor), one of 35 sponsors of H.327, feels, "the bill is an appropriate response for people to make in view of the seriousness of the issues confronting us. Furthermore, people feel helpless when a high international company begins moving in with a lot of money." Hunter also sees Vermont's current nuclear power law as setting a precedent for the regulation of uranium mining.

Although the Agency for Environmental Conservation has not taken a position on the leases, some officials have spoken publicly in support of exploration, if only for purely scientific purposes. Dr. Charles Ratte, state geologist with the Agency, has said, "~~Citizens should be quite aware of what they're living with naturally.~~ If we have radon in our water and that's a natural health hazard, let's find out about it."

Some environmentalists, on the other hand, feel that uranium exploration cannot be separated from its ultimate goal of mining and milling. Dr. Chauncy Kepford, a research chemist, testifying before the House Natural Resources Committee, said, "The

danger of exploration is the tendency toward 'programmatic inertia'—companies will try to protect their investments." Kepford also warned that when high grade uranium supplies elsewhere in the country begin to dwindle, Vermont's low grade uranium ore will start looking more economically attractive.

Arguments for and against the bill are forming around the question of whether or not the Act 250 process is sufficient to resolve the issues involved in uranium mining and milling. Act 250 prohibits permits for mining or processing operations or for the disposal of waste when these activities have a harmful effect on the environment. Despite the comprehensive language in the Act, there is still some concern that the Environment Agency would not have the necessary resources to adequately review a permit request.

Charles Sheketoff, Assistant Director of Vermont Public Interest Research Group, sees the vast financial and technical resources at the disposal of private companies, like Urangesellschaft or the Exxon Corporation, as one of the most persuasive arguments for passage of H.327. Sheketoff comments, "There is no one now in the State who could present the technical information that would be needed." Mining companies, he points out, are prepared to spend inordinate sums of money to obtain an Act 250 permit. "For example," he says, "Pyramid spent \$2 million during its Act 250 hearing. Urangesellschaft is prepared to spend \$8 to \$9 million on exploration alone before the Act 250 process even begins."

Supporters of H.327 also point to the high risks involved in the mining of uranium. Sheketoff feels that the issues are unlike those associated with other kinds of developments like large shopping malls. He says, "The consequences of human error or misjudgment are much more grave and last much longer."

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