

Encyclopedia of Politics of the American West

Mining, Uranium

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Western states have been endowed with significant uranium resources, and uranium mining plays a significant role in western states' economic development and natural resources policy. The post–World War II emergence of nuclear weapons and increased demand for nuclear power produced the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission, which was charged with promoting the nuclear industry and uranium mining. This mining occurred in various western states, including the Four Corners Region, Colorado's Rocky Flats, Washington's Hanford Reservation, and other locales (see below).

While this mining resulted in significant production output, technological advances, and economic development gains, it also produced adverse public health consequences for miners and adjacent populations in the form of increased cancer and leukemia. This resulted in court cases in which Navajo Indians and other litigants sued the federal government, claiming the government was responsible for increased cancer incidence among miners. These cases—*Begay v. United States*, 591 F. Supp. 991 (1984), and *Baryson v. United States*, 630 F. Supp. 418 (1985)—were dismissed by federal courts, and the Supreme Court refused to hear them. However, in 1990, Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (P.L. 101–426), providing up to \$50,000 in compensation for downwind civilians who are diagnosed with certain types of cancer and leukemia and up to \$100,000 for uranium miners acquiring these diseases.

Uranium mining occurs in various western locales, including White Mesa Mill (Blanding, Utah), the Alta Mesa Project (Brooks County, Texas), the Crowe Butte Operation (northwest Nebraska), and Smith Ranch-Highland (Converse County, Wyoming). U.S. uranium oxide sales in 2010 were 2.68 million pounds at a weighted-average price of \$37.59 per pound. Arizona, Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming accounted for 98 percent of uranium-production industry employment in 2010. Uranium expenditures for land, exploration, drilling, and reclamation were \$277 million in 2010, and industry employment for this year was 1,073 person-years, with Wyoming having the most employees.

Domestic uranium capacity is augmented by foreign imports totaling 32.6 million pounds in 2010, with leading suppliers being Russia, Canada, Australia, Kazakhstan, and

Namibia. The United States delivered 19,372 pounds of enriched uranium in 2010 to the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and other European countries and 26,095 pounds to U.S. customers.

The uranium industry interacts with many federal agencies, including the Department of Energy's national laboratories, the National Nuclear Security Administration, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the privatized U.S. Enrichment Corporation. Western state governments and nongovernment organizations also seek to influence the development and monitor the impact of uranium industry activities. The prospect of the United States increasing its reliance on nuclear energy to meet continually growing domestic energy needs, and the need to address concerns over environmental impacts of various energy sources, means the uranium industry's importance will increase along with public scrutiny of its activities.

Albert T. Chapman

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See also

Further Readings

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