

Officials concerned about possible GBNP changes

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Opinions circulated during an informal meeting Dec. 3 between representatives of the city of Ely, White Pine County, Robinson Nevada Mining and power plant developers were that a Class I air quality designation for Great Basin National Park could result in economic disaster for White Pine, Eureka and Elko counties.

Ely Mayor Jon Hickman and several other local people have expressed concern about the future of mining and the proposed coal-fired Ely Energy Center and White Pine Energy Station, since two representatives of the Government Accountability Office from Washington, D.C., held several meetings in White Pine County in November to gather information about air quality in and around GBNP.

The meetings between the GAO and local officials and business leaders were in response to a congressional mandate initiated by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., to determine what is known about current and future air quality and visibility. The mandate for GAO involvement followed an attempt by Reid in late 2007 to insert a GBNP reclassification from a Class II to Class I area under the Clean Air Act into an end of the year omnibus appropriations bill.

The language was later stricken from the bill to ease its passage due to opposition by Republican leaders led by Sen. John Ensign and Rep. Dean Heller, both R-Nev.

The participants at the meeting all agreed that if the Class I designation were put into place, it would stop the development of the coal-fired power plants, something Reid has pledged to accomplish. The Intermountain Power Project, a coal-fired power plant in Delta, Utah, is also within the area potentially affected. A Class I designation has the potential of causing the denial of permit renewals for existing mining operations in White Pine, Eureka and Elko counties.

Reid formerly supported coal-fired power plants before rotating his views 180 degrees.

Sally McLeod, superintendent of environmental services at the Robinson Nevada Mine, questioned Reid's motives.

"I can't help but wonder if he's (Reid) greening up," McLeod told the *Ely Times* following the informal meeting.

She speculated that with the 2010 election on the horizon for Reid, who has substantial support from environmental groups, and with his two sons having possible political aspirations, he could be playing a political game with environmentalists.

"He can't be as powerful if he's anti environment," McLeod said.

"What's puzzling me is the governor has the power," she said.

She was referring to a provision of the Clean Air Act that allows governors to designate areas as Class I by written notification to the EPA. Before a governor could take that action, public input is required.

Two weeks ago, Reid once again urged Gov. Jim Gibbons to reconsider plans for three coal-fired power plants, the two in White Pine County and a third near Mesquite. Reid based his insistence on a recent ruling by the EPA's Environmental Appeals Board that overturned the final permit for the construction of Deseret Power's proposed expansion of a new 110-megawatt waste coal-fired unit at the existing Bonanza Generating Station, on the Uintah and Ouray Indian reservation about 35 miles south of Vernal, Utah.

Power from that plant is provided to parts of Utah, White Pine and Eureka counties through Mt.

Wheeler Power.

The ruling was on the grounds that the EPA's Denver office failed to adequately support its decision to issue the permit in August 2007 by not limiting carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. The decision by the appeals board was based on a April 2007 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Massachusetts vs. EPA recognizing CO₂ as a pollutant under the federal Clean Air Act and therefore subject to regulation.

"They knew what our lifestyle was (when GBNP became a national park). We're puzzled as to what has changed," McLeod said.

She speculated that GBNP is located in a clean air corridor for Grand Canyon National Park and a Class I designation for GBNP would achieve the air quality goals of some environmental groups.

"A lot of environmentalists don't understand that we're regulated," McLeod said. "They're on the outside looking in."

The Robinson Nevada Mine is currently licensed until October 2011. If the air quality standard at GBNP increases to Class I, the mine would have to spend a considerable amount of money to address dust produced from the open-pit operations and some combustion issues.

"It might render it uneconomical to run a mine," McLeod said.

"It would definitely prohibit growth," she said. "It would dramatically increase operating costs."

McLeod said other impacts from a Class I designation would include mandating annual smog checks for private vehicles in White Pine and other rural Nevada counties and could restrict the use of fireplaces and wood burning stoves in private homes to clear days only.

"A lot of this is educating the public as far as reclassification," said White Pine County Commissioner Laurie Carson.

She raised a concern that a Class I designation could jeopardize the future of the biomass plant at David E. Norman Elementary School, a green energy project that burns wood chips.

Carson then asked McLeod if the proposed change could affect the Southern Nevada Water Authority's proposed pipeline.

"They (SNWA) would have to have more controls on their dust. It would also add a layer of permitting," McLeod responded.

Ely City Councilman Jerry Meyer said a Class I designation would mandate that GBNP determine air quality values and draft a management plan. He also said the Baker archeological site could be impacted because of dust produced.

Hickman said he plans to discuss these issues with other Nevada mayors.