Nuclear Energy and the West

By Stephanie Malin

As this publication of Rural Connections indicates, energy policy has taken center stage in the United States. Senators McCain and Obama identify energy as a key campaign issue; news programs and even advertisements focus increasingly on development of renewable energy sources; and we all feel growing costs of current energy sources at the gas pumps and in our monthly bills. Indeed, in this historic period, it has become apparent that American voters and consumers view energy policy — our sources of energy, what types of energy we will use and innovate — as a key concern.

For those of us in the West, however, the production and use of energy have long been real, concrete concerns. For decades, resource extraction for energy production has occurred in or near our communities, which often host mills and plants processing energy sources or serve as waste repositories for energy’s end products. In the West, energy development deeply affects our quality of life. Our communities’ participation in energy production has also left decades-long legacies that still affect communities’ natural environments, as well as individuals and economies embedded within them. For decades, Western communities have weathered boom and bust cycles related to energy production.

Is a Nuclear Power Renaissance in the Best Interest of the West?

Nuclear power in particular has had unique impacts in the West, leaving behind legacies in degraded environmental quality, human health, and even citizen quality of life. Thus, while some policy analysts view nuclear renewal as a promising and profitable answer to high energy costs and concerns over greenhouse gas emissions, Westerners must carefully weigh both positive and negative implications of nuclear power’s renewal. Uranium mining and milling, comprising the first stages in production of nuclear fuel, have touched many towns throughout the West.¹ That stage of the nuclear fuel cycle, and its legacy in communities scattered throughout the West, illustrates some of the most pressing concerns we face when discussing nuclear renewal. In particular, we must ask: what have been the legacies of uranium in the West and have they been adequately addressed? How have isolated, rural communities dealt with this legacy? How can this help such communities decide what energy policies are best for their futures?

Anyone living in the West knows that the nuclear renaissance is not simply a potential occurrence but has already begun. While waste repositories and sites for future reactors are still sources of controversy, we already see a boom in uranium prospecting, mining, and milling. This raises concerns, with uranium exposure having created some of the most contentious and dangerous environmental and individual health legacies in the West. Nonetheless, many Western communities feel lured by the economic boom uranium offers, and rightfully so. Since 2005, over 18,000 new mining claims have been made in Colorado and Utah alone. Prices for ore and refined uranium have skyrocketed, increasing from below $10 per pound in 2002 to over $90 per pound in 2007. While profitable, uranium extraction and processing remain potentially dangerous activities/industries, due to lacking regulation and enforcement of dust and radiation exposure levels. Uranium remains potentially dangerous especially for communities surrounding extraction and processing sites, as these towns are often the most vulnerable and least protected by government safety and exposure regulations. While nuclear renewal creates short-term economic incentives for Western communities, looking at uranium’s legacy offers a unique opportunity to learn lessons from the past and implement them in current policy.

The Legacy of the Previous Uranium Boom

Communities dealing with uranium’s legacy are scattered throughout the West’s Colorado Plateau, a geographical region rich in uranium and which spans Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona. One such community is Monticello, Utah, a rural, isolated community of about 1900 people in Utah’s southeast corner. Monticello hosted a vanadium and uranium-processing mill between 1942 and 1960, a mill owned by the federal government. The facility left behind two million tons of tailings piles — materials from which were used to build much of the town’s infrastructure — and enough contamination to warrant a $250 million Superfund clean up in the 1990s. While Monticello’s land has been cleaned, people still experience uranium’s legacy in their physical health and general quality of life. In a town of 1900 people, over 550 cases of cancer and 100 cases of respiratory complications (and growing) have been documented in the last decade.

A local grassroots activist group — the Victims of Mill Tailings Exposure (VMTE) — leads the fight to get a local cancer screening and treatment facility as well as a federally-funded trust fund intended to pay for Monticellians’ medical treatments. Monticello residents and the VMTE in particular have made these requests from the federal government because they owned the mill that locals believe caused their cancers, respiratory problems, and other ailments. Says one VMTE member “What we’re all about is...to make
the federal government make right
the wrong they did to the community.”
Another contended that he is a part of
the VMTE because “we’ve [the community]
questioned the government many times
and get the same response: there’s not
a problem down there. Yet cancer is in
every neighborhood, every other house
basically.”

Monticellans experience this legacy
everyday, receiving little attention and,
thus far, very little compensation from
the federal government. Instead, the latter
continues to assert the need for more
research into Monticello’s cancer rates and
their link to uranium exposure. In fact, the
federal government and the VMTE have
been struggling over this issue since 1993,
leaving Monticellans feeling frustrated
and forgotten.

Even as nuclear renewal and another
boom in the uranium industry takes place,
communities such as Monticello – and
many other communities throughout
the West – struggle with similar
environmental, health, and quality of
life concerns. Concerns that are, as of
yet, largely unanswered by the federal
government.

What Can We Learn From Monticello?
What does such a story teach us? First, it
illustrates the importance and intensity of
uranium’s legacy in the West. Westerners
in towns throughout the Navajo Nation, in
Grand Junction, Colorado, and Hanford,
Washington, to name only a few, deal
with similar problems on a daily basis –
with health complications, loss of trust in
government, and an overall decline in
community-wide quality of life. If as a
nation we decide that nuclear renaissance
is the future, this story reminds us that
communities such as Monticello, which
sacrificed for nuclear technology decades
ago, must first be compensated for their
sacrifices and suffering. Not only could
this remedy harmful legacies, but also it
will encourage greater care and safety
regulations in the future.

Second, this case teaches us that location
matters where energy is concerned.
Rural western communities are often
isolated and get little national attention.
Thus, these areas are easier to ignore
than more visible communities in highly-
populated areas when they experience
environmental and human health injustices
such as those seen in Monticello. In their
isolated locations, they often have little
political power. Western communities now
find themselves in a tricky position. On the
one hand, they are at the epicenter of an
economically tempting uranium boom. On
the other, community leaders and citizens
realize that their geographical isolation
can lead to political powerlessness,
wherein rural communities may be used
for their natural resources and then
abandoned when the boom busts.

Conclusion
These observations leave us with serious
questions about the viability of nuclear
renaissance for rural communities in the
West. While it could offer temporary
economic prosperity, uranium’s legacy
alone serves as a strong reminder that
health concerns have gone unaddressed
by government reparations or regulations.
In other words, communities participating
in uranium mining and milling today are
no more protected from safety hazards
than the Monticellos of the past.

For this and other reasons, uranium may
prove too risky. Western rural communities
may decide that other sources of
renewable energy discussed in this issue
may provide long-lasting and sustainable
economic prosperity. Residents in Western
rural communities must ask whether true
alternative energy sources such as solar,
wind, and geothermal might be much
less complicated and risky for their
communities. At this crossroads of energy
policy, Western rural communities have
the right to decide whether a return to
the past or a transition to the future offers
the more sustainable option. Cooperative
extension agents and universities could
provide the vital resources – especially
networks and various skill sets - to
help communities weigh the positive
and negative implications of uranium
mining and milling. At this critical point
in the development of energy policy,
it is incumbent upon such specialists to
help equip communities with knowledge
needed to make the best decisions for
their well-being – economically, socially,
and in terms of health.

Author’s Picks for Further Reading
http://www.wise-uranium.org/uwai.html
Amundson, Michael A. 2004. Yellowcake
Towns: Mining the American West.
University Press of Colorado.

Ringholz, Raye. 2002. Uranium Frenzy:
Saga of the Nuclear West. Logan, UT:
Utah State University Press.

Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War.
NY: Random House.

Endnotes
1Uranium is a commonly occurring,
radioactive element that is used to
produce nuclear fuel and other sources
of energy. While found in trace amounts
in much of the natural world, high doses
of uranium can be harmful and uranium
can decay into more highly radioactive
substances, such as radium.

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