Nuclear Energy and the West

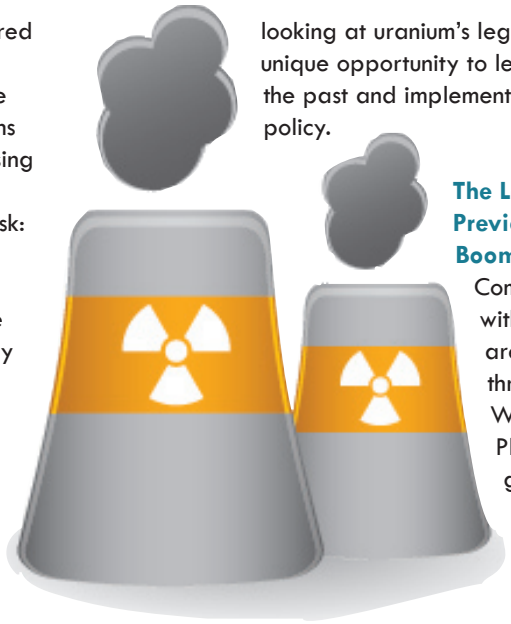
By Stephanie Malin

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 qualities 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 Monticellans' 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.

Gallagher, Carole. 1993. American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War. NY: Random House.

Endnotes

[1]Uranium 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.

About the Author

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