

Pinon Ridge mill can help meet needs safely

By [The Daily Sentinel](#)

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The Pinon Ridge uranium mill — the first new uranium processing facility in the United States in decades — could be operational by the end of next year. That is, if Energy Fuels Resources, the company developing the mill, can overcome a legal challenge to its state permit filed by environmental groups.

To a great extent, groups opposed to the mill are raising the specter of past environmental catastrophes, when the uranium industry was virtually unregulated. But they also have raised a number of issues that deserve further consideration by state and local permitting authorities.

We have long argued that nuclear power needs to be part of the equation in our energy future as the demand for electricity continues to rise. Pinon Ridge can play an important role in meeting that demand. And it will do so in a far different way than, say, the mill that operated in Grand Junction during the 1950s and 1960s, which left a mountain of unprotected uranium mill tailings deteriorating next to and in the Colorado River.

These days, environmental rules require that tailings be isolated from water sources, must have impervious liners, that they be covered and secured. The plan for tailings at Pinon Ridge would allow that to be accomplished incrementally as the mill operates.

Also, new health rules mandate safer working conditions in both the mill and uranium mines. Gone are the days when Camel-smoking miners could work for countless hours in unventilated mines with no breathing protection, and when mines and mills alike could dump their tailings wherever they found it convenient.

Still, a few issues deserve to be examined further.

First, the bond for Energy Fuels needs to be adequate to handle cleanup of the facility, although upfront precautions should prevent that from ever reaching the hundreds of millions needed to clean up the old Grand Junction mill.

There should also be adequate training of emergency services personnel in the area to ensure they are capable of handling any potential spills or health-related emergencies.

Finally, there must be no question that Pinon Ridge will store only low-level radioactive waste from its own operations — that it cannot develop into a regional or national

disposal site for radioactive waste. The company has said it has no plans to accept outside wastes, but the permits are somewhat ambiguous in this regard.

These concerns aside, we hope the Pinon Ridge mill will be operational before long, helping to serve the energy needs of this country and the economic needs of the Western Slope.