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Southern Hills Battle Over Uranium Mining

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On today's Dakota Digest we have a tale of two ranchers on opposite sides of the fence. Both live in the Southern Black Hills and are divided over the issue of uranium mining. The Power-Tec Mining Company is planning to develop uranium reserves near Edgemont. Some local ranchers are worried about long term water contamination, but others say mining will bring an economic boost to the community.

By Charles Michael Ray

Dayton Hyde is about to sit down to his favorite breakfast, fresh scrambled eggs straight from chicken coop out back, along with shallots and ham. Hyde has been ranching for most of his life. In this time he's authored some 20 books on wild life and the wild west. Today, at 85 years old, he's still cooking his own breakfast each morning.

"I've gotten that old in spite of eating all these eggs. All the doctors that told me to do this and do that they died a long time ago," chuckles Hyde.

It could be argued that Hyde's kitchen window looks out on one of the most beautiful pieces of land in the Southern Black Hills. The Wild Horse Sanctuary lies just south of Cascade Falls. Petroglyph covered canyon walls look down on five hundred horses who run free across the valleys and ridges of the Cheyenne River.

"The wild horses are kind of my allies, in helping save this from development. It's set up so it can never be built on," Hyde says. "It's about 11-thousand acres and it's really worth saving," he adds.

While this land won't be developed, Hyde is worried about what is being planned just upstream from his ranch, in-situ uranium mining. It involves pumping solution down into an aquifer to dissolve the uranium ore below, then sucking that dissolved uranium out, removing it from the water, and pumping the waste water back into the aquifer.

"It's disgraceful that they even think of polluting these underground streams," he says. "There is no way they can mine uranium and not poison those aquifers. And this country is dependent on wells. Once you destroy the purity of underground streams it's the end of a country," adds Hyde.

A few dozen miles up stream from the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary sits Mark Hollenbeck's ranch. Hollenbeck is all organic. He has about 65 head of organic cattle right on the Cheyenne River, just a stones throw from the proposed uranium mine site. Hollenbeck also runs a second *quest* ranch with several rooms for hunters and tourists. But, his main occupation is for the mining company. Hollenbeck is the project Manager for Power Tec in Edgemont. He's raising four kids in the same place he grew up.

"And I have no interest in degrading the environment so I can't ranch or that I can't do my quest ranch and that I can't raise my kids here. I mean that's not in my best interest." says Hollenbeck.

Hollenbeck has a degree in chemical engineering and he's convinced that in-situ uranium mining can be done without harming the environment. One of the proposed mines is set to go in right next to his parents property, it will be the same aquifer he, his folks, and his brothers all draw water from. So Hollenbeck is staking everything on the idea that this mine can be done right. He says the whole community of Edgemont will benefit.

"Not very often do you have an opportunity to bring 80 good paying jobs to a community of nine hundred I mean that's really something," says Hollenbeck.

But others see the quest for jobs as nearsighted. They point out that uranium has a half life of about 4.5 billion years. The part of the aquifer where the mine is placed will require a permanent exemption from the federal clean water act. Ranchers like Dayton Hyde say uranium mines are never really restored.

"A lot of these uranium miners have a bad reputation of mining it and leaving the public to clean up the mess, and they might bring in a few temporary dollars but the history of mining is boom and bust - they come in and take it and they're gone," says Hyde

In his pickup, driving past the mine site, Hollenbeck insists the water quality can be restored after the mining is done. And he's betting his reputation, his livelihood and his family's water supply.

"As far as the ground water being contaminated, that's where the uranium is today, it's in the ground water we're removing it. This is like a water clean up project were going to sell the bi-product on," says Hollenbeck.

The debate over the environmental impacts versus the economic benefits of uranium mining is far from over. For his part Dayton Hyde is approaching this like an old gunslinger, walking onto main street at high noon for his last showdown.

"Like I say I'm 85 and I got one great fight left in me and boy I'm going to spend what little strength I have left in fighting this," says Hyde.

Hyde and the wild horse sanctuary, along with a group of other concerned organizations have intervened in the Nuclear Regulatory Agency's approval process for the Power Tec Mine. They want to keep uranium mining out of the Black Hills. Meanwhile Mark Hollenbeck is pushing forward, to put the mine into operation as soon as possible and to continue to explore for uranium in other sites. But there are more regulatory hurdles to overcome. Lawsuits could also delay the project. The showdown over uranium mining in the Southern Hills isn't going to end anytime soon.