

North Dakotans wary of renewed uranium interest
By JAMES MacPHERSON Associated Press Writer
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BELFIELD, N.D.

Geiger counters were a hot item in this small town a half century ago, purchased by locals hoping to hit a big uranium strike. Nearly every business in town – including the pool hall – sold the radioactive-reading instruments to wannabe uranium prospectors.

Nearly 50 years later, stung by unregulated uranium mines and worried about their health, many locals wish the radioactive element had never been found in their back yards.

"People weren't worried about it then because they had no idea what it was," said Barbara Thompson, a Belfield resident for nearly 60 years. "Now we know what it is and what's going on."

Belfield, a town of about 880 is in North Dakota's Badlands, within 20 miles of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, the state's top tourist attraction.

Some southwestern North Dakota residents blame uranium mining on everything from illuminated livestock to an inordinate amount of cancer in humans. Health officials say they have not found evidence of either.

A uranium industry official says mining companies made a mess in North Dakota and elsewhere in the 1960s but companies are pledging to be better stewards this time around.

"There are legacy issues," said Jon Indall, attorney for Uranium Producers of America. The Santa Fe, N.M.-based trade group represents about 16 uranium companies, he said.

"We're willing to work with states and everybody else to make sure it's done right this time – we feel it can be done in a safe manner," Indall said.

Recharged interest in uranium exploration in the West, fueled by a worldwide demand for nuclear power has sparked huge price

increases, from about \$7 a pound in 2002 to about \$135 by midsummer. The price dropped to around \$90 in late August.

North Dakota State Geologist Ed Murphy said no permits have been issued for uranium exploration but his office is beginning to get inquiries from mining companies looking to stake new claims in North Dakota for the first time in about 30 years,

"There have been a number of mining companies expressing interest to us," Murphy said. "We've got a lot of people looking."

Mining companies currently are focusing efforts first in more uranium-rich states such as Wyoming, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Nebraska, Utah and South Dakota, Indall said.

"Certainly if North Dakota has the resources, somebody is bound to be up there," he said.

Uranium was first discovered in North Dakota in the 1940s, in lignite beds in the western part of the state, Murphy said.

Uranium mining in North Dakota occurred between 1962 and 1967, producing about 592,000 pounds of uranium oxide, or "yellowcake," Murphy said. He believes the state still has at least that much.

U.S. production for the same time in the 1960s was about 120 million pounds, he said.

Uranium was mined from at least nine sites in southwestern North Dakota, and perhaps as many as 16, Murphy said. Officials may never know exactly how many mines produced uranium in North Dakota because of poor record-keeping by the state and by mining companies, he said.

Uranium mining in North Dakota and elsewhere predated any federal regulations, Indall and Murphy said. North Dakota adopted regulations in 1968, a year after uranium mining stopped in the state, Murphy said.

The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, the predecessor to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, in its haste to build uranium

stockpiles for nuclear weapons, focused primarily on finding the element, not cleaning up the radioactive sites after it had been mined, Indall said.

"The first time around, the Atomic Energy Commission wanted material," Indall said. "Nobody understood some of these issues in the old days."

Cory Smith, 36, who ranches near Belfield, said he was approached in early August by a land speculator wanting to lease rights for uranium exploration on his land.

"I wouldn't take a million dollars," Smith said. "I'm not interested in it all."

Both of his grandmother's husbands, who had uranium mines named for them, died of cancer at a young age, Smith said. Another rancher in the area, who also had a mine named for him, also died young of cancer, he said. He does not know whether the ranchers' deaths were caused by the uranium mines.

"I can't say for sure," said Smith, an Iraq war veteran. "All I know is cancer got some of us and I'm not interested in encouraging it."

Dave Glatt, director of the state Health Department's environmental health section, said no studies have ever been done to track the number of people in the area who died of cancer.

"We're not aware of any studies done in that area," Glatt said. "We really didn't keep a cancer registry."

The region's low population would have made tracking cancer statistically inaccurate in any attempt to trace it to uranium mining, he said.

The federal Department of Energy has done studies about the health effects of the mines, Glatt said, but federal researchers found the health risk was "low related to those sites."

Mining companies burned lignite to reach the uranium that was within the coal deposits, Murphy said. Companies set the mines ablaze, using old tires or diesel fuel to ignite the open pits. Mills

were built in Belfield and at a railroad siding near Bowman to burn the lignite to extract the yellowcake from lignite.

Murphy said the uranium-laden ash was then shipped to Utah, Colorado or South Dakota to be processed further.

The Fritz Mine near Belfield was named for Lesley Fritz, who's 92 now and lives in a nursing home in Dickinson. Fritz said he's proof that the mines did not cause cancer in everyone who lived near them.

"I wouldn't be a judge of that," he said.

But Fritz said the smoke wafting from the burning uranium mine disintegrated fences that held his cattle.

"It takes quite a little bit to ruin a barb wire fence – but it ate my fences," Fritz said.

Cattle in the area also changed color during uranium mining in the 1960s, he said.

"I know it's a fact," Fritz said. "You could see a different tinge to their hair color."

Stan Soderstrom's late father, Stanley, said in a newspaper article in the early 1970s that his sheep "glowed a blue hue" and he suspected that uranium mining was the cause.

The family owned land in the area around the uranium mill near Bowman.

Stan Soderstrom said many of his father's sheep died or got sick.

"It caused a lot of problems with livestock in the area," said Soderstrom, who now lives in Ellendale, in the south central North Dakota.

"I believe it caused a lot of health problems but I've never been satisfied with the answers," he said. "A lot of people are still complaining about the long-term effects."

Fritz said some of the biggest damage done by the uranium mining was to the land, which he said was scarred for years.

"Sixty acres or better of my land was left in a sore-eye type of thing," Fritz said. He believes residue from uranium mining in the area also leached into a creek at his ranch.

"We had what looked like good, clear water," Fritz said. "But there wasn't a cow track anywhere around it – they didn't want nothing to do with it."

Jim Deutsch, who heads the Public Service Commission's reclamation division, said all known uranium mine sites have been cleaned up in North Dakota, except for one on private land near Fryberg, southwest of Belfield.

"We didn't get access from the landowner to go in and reclaim it," Deutsch said.

Nine uranium mine sites, including the one on Fritz's ranch, were reclaimed in southwestern North Dakota between 1980 and 2004, he said.

A total of 460 acres was reclaimed at a cost of \$3.2 million, Deutsch said. The work was paid for by a federal abandoned mine reclamation fund, supported by a tax that coal companies pay.

Murphy said the sites were cleaned up by burying the most radioactive material in the bottom of the pits and leveling the surface.

Any new mining in North Dakota would involve a process called "in-situ," which involves using chemicals and water to leach out uranium and pump it to the surface. None of the sites would be burned as was done earlier, something Murphy called "an environmental disaster."

New state rules are being crafted for companies to follow if they intend to mine for uranium in North Dakota again, Murphy said.

Public meetings will likely be held throughout southwest North Dakota this fall to explain the new rules and to take public comments, he said.