

# U.S. Bans Mining Claims Near Grand Canyon

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The Obama administration announced Monday a 20-year ban on new mining claims on more than 1 million acres near the Grand Canyon, among the most well-known and visited natural wonders in the United States.

The area is known to have large reserves of high-grade uranium ore, and critics contend the ban.

The decision ignored pressure from congressional Republicans and mining industry figures who wanted a policy change to open the area for additional mining claims.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced the 20-year ban at an event Monday in Washington.

Temporary bans had been imposed twice by the Obama administration. Salazar said uranium remains an important part of a comprehensive energy strategy but said the Grand Canyon is a national treasure that must be protected.

The vast canyon in northeastern Arizona attracts more than 4 million visitors a year and generates an estimated \$3.5 billion in economic activity, Salazar said. Millions of Americans living in cities including Phoenix, the Arizona capital, and Los Angeles, California, rely on the Colorado River for clean drinking water.

"A withdrawal is the right approach for this priceless American landscape," Salazar said in a speech at the National Geographic Museum. "People from all over the country and around the world come to visit the Grand Canyon. Numerous American Indian tribes regard this magnificent icon as a sacred place, and millions of people in the Colorado River Basin depend on the river for drinking water [and] irrigation."

As Interior Secretary, he has been "entrusted to care for and protect our precious environmental and cultural resources," Salazar said, adding that he has chosen "a responsible path that makes sense for this and future generations."

Conservation groups call the 20-year ban a crucial protection for an American icon. The mining industry and some Republican members of Congress say it is detrimental to Arizona's economy and the nation's energy independence.

Republican members of Arizona's congressional delegation have lambasted the temporary bans imposed by Salazar in 2009 and again last year. They say a permanent ban on the filing of new mining claims would eliminate hundreds of jobs and unravel decades of responsible resource development. Rep. Jeff Flake, an Arizonan, and other Republican lawmakers had backed legislation that would prevent Salazar from moving forward with the 20-year ban.

"The secretary's decision to rule out mining on more than one million acres of federal land deprives the United States of energy and minerals critically important to its economy and does so without compelling scientific evidence that is necessary for such a far-reaching measure," said Hal Quinn, president and CEO of the National Mining Association.

Environmental groups call the ban a long-awaited but decisive victory, noting that the Colorado River, which runs through the Grand Canyon, is the source of drinking water for 26 million Americans.

"Secretary Salazar has defended the Southwest's right to plentiful, clean water and America's dedication to one of our most precious landscapes," said Dusty Horwitt, senior counsel for the Environmental Working Group, a Washington-based advocacy group.

"Despite significant pressure from the mining industry, the president and Secretary Salazar did not back down," said Jane Danowitz, U.S. public lands director for the Pew Environment Group.

Salazar said the ban would not affect more than 3,000 mining claims already staked in the area near the Grand Canyon.

The administration of former President George W. Bush had opened the land to new mining claims. Salazar reversed the Bush policy in 2009 and put in set up a two-year moratorium on new mining claims around the canyon. He followed up with a six-month extension last year.

Supporters of the ban say any increase in mining jobs is not worth risks to the Colorado River, lands considered sacred by American Indian tribes or wildlife habitat. A mining mishap also could be disastrous for tourism in a park that ranks among the nation's most-visited by Americans and foreign tourists alike.