

## Environmental groups battle Mount Taylor mine decision

By Associated Press

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GRANTS — Environmentalists are seeking to keep an idle uranium mine in western New Mexico from becoming active again, saying the designation will allow it to delay cleanup.

The Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment and Amigos Bravos are asking the New Mexico Mining Commission to review a recent decision by state Mining and Minerals Division Director Fernando Martinez to allow the Mount Taylor mine to return to “active,” or operational, status, the Gallup Independent reports.

The groups say there is no realistic likelihood that mining will take place for the foreseeable future.

“The director’s decision directly contradicts the New Mexico Mining Act’s plain language, which restricts ‘operational’ mines to those that are producing minerals,” said Eric Jantz, staff attorney at the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, which is representing the groups. “The director has unilaterally created an entirely new category of mine activity — ‘zombie mines’ — that have been given new life in an effort to avoid cleanup.”

The Mount Taylor Mine has been on standby status for more than 20 years. Its owner, Rio Grande Resources, announced in 2014 that it planned to ask regulators to change the status to active.

“It’s their right to protest it just as much as it’s our right to submit an application for it,” mine manager Joe Lister said. “I think it’s a great system, personally. It keeps everybody honest. I happen to be on the other side of the fence.”

Lister said the mining commission will schedule a meeting to hear the director’s rationale for his decision.

The New Mexico Mining Act of 1993 allows mines to remain inactive in standby status for a maximum of 20 years before reclamation must be required.

The Navajo Nation still is reeling from the decades that the federal government allowed uranium mining on and around its reservation. Between the late 1940s and the mid-1980s, about 4 million tons of uranium were extracted from the Navajo Nation. At the time, uranium was mined to produce nuclear weapons for World War II and the Cold War.

The ore was removed via conventional underground mining, a practice that allowed uranium to seep into the land and water in the surrounding area.

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