

Statement by Senator John McCain
on H.R. 3155, the Northern Arizona Mining Continuity Act of 2011
before the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
November 3, 2011

“Thank you, Chairman Bishop, for the opportunity to testify about the importance of safeguarding multiple use management policy in northern Arizona. The legislation introduced by myself and Congressman Trent Franks, along with a majority of the Arizona Congressional delegation, would prevent the Secretary of the Interior from implementing his proposed 1 million acre mining withdrawal in northern Arizona. I hold Secretary Salazar in high esteem but this withdrawal is fueled by an emotional public relations campaign designed by some of the same environmental groups whose longtime mission has been to kill mining and grazing jobs on the Arizona Strip as well as tourism jobs at the Grand Canyon.

“Mr. Chairman, Senator Hatch and I have served our respective states for many years and the aspiration by the environmental community to halt mining in the Grand Canyon region is old news to us. It existed during the last uranium rebound in the late 1970s and early 1980s with thousands of mining claims staked in the same areas of the “northern parcel” of the proposed withdrawal area. The difference is that back then, the environmental community put their aspirations aside to constructively work with stakeholders to reach a historic agreement on wilderness designation in the Arizona Wilderness Act of 1984 (P.L. 98-406). While credit is due to my good friend, the late-Congressman Mo Udall, for shepherding the Act through Congress, Title III of the bill (also known as ‘the Arizona Strip Wilderness Act’) was developed through negotiations led by the late-Congressman Bob Stump. The Act ultimately designated over 250,000 acres of wilderness on the Arizona Strip and released about 600,000 acres of federal land for multiple-use development.

“During negotiations on the 1984 Act, Congress struggled with how to legislatively ‘release’ non-Wilderness lands from being locked-up as administrative or ‘*de facto*’ Wilderness, but also allow for some flexibility in preserving these lands through responsible land management. Some argued for enacting so-called ‘hard release language’ which proscriptively enforced a multiple-use mandate on non-Wilderness lands. Others wanted ‘soft release language’ which continued restrictions on non-Wilderness lands so as to preserve their wilderness characteristics. What made the Arizona Wilderness Act the gold standard of stakeholder collaboration and bipartisan compromise is that it utilized so-called ‘compromise release language’ and intentionally authorized the presence of ‘*non-wilderness uses as determined appropriate through the [BLM] land management planning process.*’

“Until now, that compromise allowed for uranium mining to coexist with the some of our most treasured natural resources. Unfortunately, several of the same environmental groups who once supported the compromise and singed-off on uranium mining near the Grand Canyon have come back to ask this Administration to toss out the existing land use plans and implement a massive

and arbitrary withdrawal knowing full well that uranium mining is a principal activity and job creator on the Arizona Strip. There is no scientific evidence that modern-day uranium mining in the withdrawal area has violated water quality standards in the Colorado River. The true goal of this withdrawal is to permanently restrict access to a nationally significant uranium resource, which is precisely what we sought to prevent under the 1984 Wilderness Act. What the Secretary proposes is nothing other than de facto Wilderness.

“Mr. Chairman, if the decision is made to move forward with the proposed withdrawal, the Department of the Interior will be casting aside that historic compromise and ignoring the land management planning process that has resulted in the bulk of the withdrawal area being open to uranium mining. Future wilderness proposals will be deserving of even greater scrutiny once it becomes clear that negotiated agreements like those contained in the Arizona Wilderness Act are neither genuine nor enduring.

“I fully agree that the Grand Canyon deserves to be protected for the enjoyment of future generations. However, it is totally irresponsible to move forward with the proposed withdrawal as it lacks sufficient scientific justification and flies in the face of the legislative history behind the Arizona Wilderness Act. I urge the Committee to pass this bill.”

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