

FEBRUARY 14, 2018

Greater Grand Canyon Watershed A Place “Too Precious to Mine”



By Gibson McKay

My Family’s heritage has a rich Arizona legacy that will befall generations to come. I know the delicate balance between working the land and the importance of preserving it as-is for all Americans. I roamed the spectacular landscape surrounding the Grand Canyon, never really appreciating that my three sons would represent a sixth generation of Arizonans to inherit this region as part of their living heritage.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Forest Service has recommended that the 20-year ban on new uranium mining in the Grand Canyon Watershed enacted by the Department of Interior in 2012 be lifted. This action contradicts how I believe Arizonans and Americans, in general, feel about mining in the watershed.

I have significant reservations about reopening this fragile ecosystem to uranium mining in the National Forests abutting the Grand Canyon. My wife’s family owns and operates the CO Bar and adjoining ranches in Northern Arizona, while my family farmed and, yes,

even mined copper in southern Arizona. As you can imagine, I do not oppose mining — my grandfather and uncles were copper miners in Ajo, Arizona — and there are places where mining can be done with less impact on the environment. The Grand Canyon Watershed is not such a place.

I have met with and guided friends and tourists from around the globe who visit northern Arizona for its world-class hunting, fishing, backpacking, camping and other recreational activities. In 2015 alone, travel and tourism represented about 35 percent of total private wage and salary employment in Coconino County.

We know that the risks associated with uranium mining have evolved, changing how we view loosening underground ore pipes that may encounter aquifers. The soluble radioactive particles seep into our water and springs at unknown levels of contamination. All the while, we keep in mind this watershed feeds into the

Colorado River, which provides drinking water for some 25 million people, including millions in Arizona.

We all have a stake in ensuring the land, as we know it, remains precious to the generations that follow. As a mountain boy from Arizona, I believe that the actions of the U.S. Forest Service signify a potential shift and loss of our cultural and natural heritage — not only for the Grand Canyon Watershed, but for other special places like Saguaro National Park, Chiricahua National Monument, and the many other public lands that are a vital part of Arizonans' identity.

All of us who rely on clean water should be concerned. Some things just shouldn't be politicized, and protecting the Greater Grand Canyon Watershed is one of them. I am a traditional Republican who values these special public lands and waters and who believes we have a duty to protect them for all Americans — including my three sons.

Gibson McKay is a fourth-generation Arizonan who grew up in Flagstaff. He is a nationally recognized, award-winning public affairs consultant and owner of Sherpa Public Affairs who served as an aide to U.S. Senator John McCain. He is a member of several conservative conservation organizations, including ConservAmerica and Conservatives for Responsible Stewardship. He lives in Phoenix with his wife Rebecca and their three sons.