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Mining Under Way Inside National Monument, Trust Land

BY ROBERT GEHRKE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Utah mining company is beginning work inside the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in search of deposits of zirconium and titanium.

The 3-R Minerals operation is located on a 5-acre lease on school trust land in Alvey Wash just outside of the town of Escalante.

The firm has received permission to sift through any loose earth, digging about 10 feet deep and crushing boulders in search of the minerals, said James Cooper, assistant director of minerals for the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration.

The parcel is among those to be transferred to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) under a massive federal-state land swap signed by President Clinton Oct. 31. But under the terms of the law, the parties have 70 days to finalize the transfers.

Even after the land is formally transferred, the federal government has promised to honor existing leases.

"Generally the intention is to honor the prior leases to the extent possible," said Don Banks, spokesman for the BLM state office. "We will monitor to ensure that the plan of operation is closely followed and that there is no undue disturbance. We're doing what any soon-to-be-landlord would do."

The area 3-R is searching is an ancient river delta laid down millions of years ago, Cooper said. Once the earth is sifted through, the sand will be replaced and revegetated.

Still, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance is not pleased. Communications coordinator Tom Price said the mining is only a way for 3-R to get its foot in the door so it can force the federal government to buy out its claim.

"The annoying thing is they [got permission to mine] right before the school trust land trade," said Price, who suggested that by doing it the state swapped damaged goods.

"They're not going to find anything but a lot of people angry that they're ripping up this national monument," Price said.

Allen Young, an attorney for 3-R Minerals, did not return messages left at his Springville office Thursday. Young has successfully represented other miners seeking to mine on federal land.

Monument manager Jerry Meredith said 3-R also had leases on BLM land inside the monument, but applications to mine those leases were denied because they were on areas being studied for possible wilderness designation.

Clinton created the monument via presidential proclamation in 1996. But the sprawling 1.7-million-acre federal preserve entrapped hundreds of parcels of school trust lands — acreage set up under Utah's Constitution, the proceeds of which are earmarked for Utah's schools.

In May, Gov. Mike Leavitt and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt signed off on a massive swap of school trust lands isolated inside the monument for federal land outside the protected areas. Clinton signed the bill Oct. 31, and the final transfers are expected to be complete by around Christmas.

Banks said that to date there has been little interest in hard rock mining within the monument. There are about 70 mining claims on public land in the monument.

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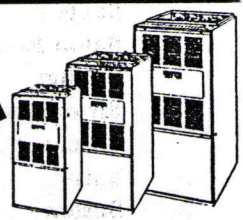

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