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## **BLM gives green light to Hatch Point potash exploration**

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by Steve Kadel

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Australia-based Potash Minerals Inc. has received approval from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to drill exploratory holes for potash at Hatch Point in San Juan County.

The BLM-owned site lies in the proposed Greater Canyonlands National Monument area. The BLM Moab field office released a finding of no significant impact and signed the decision record approving the exploration project April 25.

“The timing of the approval and the expansion of exploration activity at the project could not come at a better time,” company CEO Ben Binninger said. “Currently the U.S. market is primarily supplied from imports. New sources of domestic potash will help the USA become more self-sufficient in this critical agricultural commodity.”

However, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance field attorney Liz Thomas took a different stance.

“BLM’s decision illustrates the need for a greater level of protection in the greater Canyonlands area,” she said. Thomas added that state Route 211 going west to Hatch Point from U.S. 191 is “one of the premier viewpoints in the West” due to its proximity to the Needles area of Canyonlands National Park and lack of development, power lines or houses.

“Tens of thousands of visitors go along that road each year, along with locals,” Thomas said. “It’s an iconic place and visitors don’t flock there to look at drill rigs.”

She said drilling also has the potential to contaminate water and affect groundwater levels.

“This decision is putting the cart before the horse because the BLM has acknowledged that its current management plan around Moab didn’t do a good job of evaluating where oil and gas and potash development should take place,” Thomas said. “Even as they’ve issued this decision to allow potash (exploratory) drilling, they are looking at that very place to see if this is an appropriate site for resource development or whether it has more scenic, recreational and wildlife potential.”

Thomas emphasized that Potash Minerals, and its K20 Utah subsidiary, have no long-term concern for Hatch Point or Moab. “They are just concerned with the bottom line, if they can make money,” she said.

K2O Utah drilled exploratory wells on adjacent state-owned land in 2012. The BLM's recent move opens up 39 acres to "surface disturbance" for exploration on federal land, according to a news release from the BLM.

In its news release, Potash Minerals called the recent decision "the most significant milestone since acquiring the K2O Utah Potash Project."

The BLM previously completed an environmental assessment of the proposed exploration.

"The EA analyzed the potential environmental impacts related to the proposed construction of four core hole locations and core hole road access and improvements proposed by K2O Utah LLC," the news release said. "The exploration will take place under 22 approved potash prospecting permits."

Potash is a key ingredient in fertilizer and is particularly vital to the agriculture industry, Binninger said.

Potash Minerals now begins the feasibility stage of what it considers a "significant potash project." Earlier projections called for up to two metric tons of potash per year being taken if company estimate are accurate, Binninger said.

He has said the project, if pursued to production, could employ 190 people, most of whom would be local residents.

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