

# *Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah (page 3 of 4)*



## **Coal Mining vs. Wilderness on the Kaiparowits Plateau**

Despite of *and* because of the pristine remoteness of the Kaiparowits Plateau, a great deal of controversy has occurred over the past four decades concerning the large coal deposits in the area.

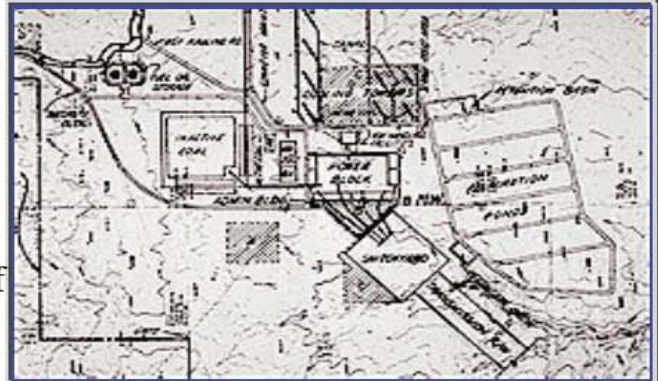
According to the USGS, 62 billion tons of [coal](#) are contained under the surface of the plateau--the largest deposit of compliance coal in the United States.

In the 1960s, a consortium of Arizona and southern California utility companies set plans into motion to build four open pit coal mines and a

coal-burning power plant on the Kaiparowits. The proposed power plant would have produced 3,000 megawatts of power for cities surrounding the Colorado Plateau, making it the largest power plant of this type in the world. The cost of the development of the mines and plant was estimated at \$3.5 billion. Eight to ten thousand employees would be needed for the operation, necessitating the creation of a new town, which would become the largest in southern Utah.

The 13-year controversy generated over this proposal made it Utah's biggest environmental issue of the 1970s. National environmental groups including the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, and the Wilderness Society rigorously opposed the Kaiparowits Project, claiming that the impacts on southern Utah's 4.4 million acres of parks and wildlands would be devastating. In stark contrast, the Utah Governor, state Congressmen, and local officials and citizens overwhelmingly approved of the project, believing it would boost the local economy and provide high paying jobs.

In the end, public, tribal, and environmental opposition, as well as economic obstacles, led to the collapse of the project in 1976. This event is considered by many to have been representative of a changing public opinion toward the uses of western lands, which were increasingly being viewed as valuable primarily for



*Kaiparowits Power Project site plan, proposed Four Mile Bench site. Nine thousand acres of vegetation would have been destroyed during construction. A network of roads, power lines, pipelines, pumping stations, and coal slurry lines would have blanketed the western half of the Kaiparowits. Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management.*

their intact beauty and remoteness. It seemed that protection of these wild lands against unnecessary large-scale disturbance, such as excess power production, was becoming a priority to a growing number of U.S. citizens and lawmakers. [See [The Drive for Protection](#), an essay by [Ray Wheeler](#).]

However, in 1991, the Dutch-owned company Andalex Resources, Inc., applied for a state permit to develop a coal mine on 10,000 acres of leased Kaiparowits Plateau land. The Andalex company proposed an underground mine, to be known as the Smoky Hollow Mine, which would produce 2-2.5 million tons of coal a year for 30 years and would cost \$60-80 million dollars to build. Although this proposal was greatly scaled down from the 1960s version, environmentalists opposed any mining in this area.

While the mine site and extraction method were selected to minimize environmental problems, the environmentalists pointed out that other aspects of the operation would have had profound impacts. Large double and triple trailer trucks, 130,000 pounds when loaded, transporting the coal would leave the mine every 3-10 minutes, 24 hours a day. In order to accommodate the trucks, a new 22-mile stretch of road would need to be constructed across hazardous, flash flood-prone terrain, along with a separate utility corridor and a series of repeater stations. The trucks would deliver the coal 220 miles or more to shipping stations in Moapa, Nevada or Cedar City, Utah. Ultimately, the coal would be shipped to southern California and Far Eastern countries. According to the Kaiparowits Coal Development and Transportation Study, the constant truck traffic would result in an estimated 150 more accidents annually on the affected roadways. In addition, two wilderness study areas (WSAs), Wahweap and Burning Hills, are within 2-4 miles of the proposed mine site, and would be adversely affected by the noise and traffic of the mine and trucks.



*Pinyon-juniper covered hills of the Burning Hills Wilderness Study Area, which begins two miles east of the proposed Andalex mine site.  
Photo © 1999 [Ray Wheeler](#).*

For the next 4 years, the Bureau of Land Management worked on developing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) so that a decision on the mine's approval could be made. During those years, opposition between interested parties was vocal and intense. Besides Andalex, proponents of the mine included most of Utah's state and local government officials, who felt that the Kaiparowits Plateau mining would bring higher paying jobs and higher tax revenues to the citizens of southern Utah. Opposing

the development were environmentalists, the most outspoken of which was the [Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance \(SUWA\)](#), which fought the mine proposal at every step along the process, including filing a suit against the Utah Division of Oil, Gas & Mining in 1995, after Andalex's mining permit was approved.

The heated battle continued, unresolved, until September, 1996, when President Clinton established the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Although the proclamation did not necessarily prohibit development of existing mining leases *per se*, the implementation of the required roads, power lines, and other infrastructural needs were very much at odds with the monument's stated purpose of preserving this "unspoiled natural area." Shortly after the monument designation, Andalex withdrew its Kaiparowits Plateau mine proposal and began to work with the federal government to negotiate land exchanges for its leases within the monument's boundaries.