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UNITED STATES ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION  
GRAND JUNCTION OPERATIONS OFFICE  
PRODUCTION EVALUATION DIVISION

URANIUM DEPOSITS OF THE URAVAN MINERAL BELT

by

H. B. Wood

and

M. A. Lekas



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## URAVAN DEPOSITS OF THE URAVAN MINERAL BELT

## INTRODUCTION

The Uravan Mineral Belt in southwestern Colorado (fig. 1) is "a narrow, elongate area in which the carnotite deposits generally have closer spacing, larger size, and higher grade than those in the adjoining areas and the region as a whole" (Fischer and Hilpert, 1952).

Mining of uranium-vanadium deposits began in the Roc Creek area of Montrose County, Colorado, in 1881. The mineral carnotite was first described and named from a specimen collected from this area in 1898 (Coffin, 1921). From 1904 until 1914 mining for radium was widespread throughout the Belt from Slick Rock to Gateway. Shipments averaged 1 to 2 percent U<sub>3</sub>O<sub>8</sub> and 2 to 5 percent V<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>. In 1922 radium from the Belgian Congo depressed the market, and most of the Uravan mines closed. Mining for vanadium became important in 1936 and continued until 1944 when the government ore purchasing program terminated. The district was again dormant until 1948 when the Atomic Energy Commission established an ore-buying schedule for uranium. Further stimulation came in 1951 when the AEC raised the base price for uranium and established an initial production bonus and other benefits. From 1948 to January 1, 1958, 680 mines have shipped 3,408,300 tons of uranium-vanadium ore with an average value of \$29.50 per ton. During the last half of 1957 production averaged 55,311 tons per month from 403 mines. Two processing mills are completely dependent upon ore from this area, and 3 other mills are partially dependent.

Between November 1947 and April 1956 the U. S. Geological Survey under memorandum agreement with the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission had 2,047,762 feet of exploration drilling done in the Belt. Between May 1949 and October 1955 the Atomic Energy Commission had 642,752 feet drilled. Private drilling during this period is estimated to have been many times as much as government drilling.

## STRATIGRAPHY AND STRUCTURE

A brief summary of the stratigraphy is shown in fig. 2. The Salt Wash member of the Morrison formation is the host rock for practically all of the uranium deposits. The Morrison is divided into two members: an upper Brushy Basin member, 290 to 500 feet thick, and the Salt Wash member, 280 to 400 feet thick. Total thickness of the Morrison ranges from 600 to 800 feet. The Salt Wash " . . . was formed as a large alluvial plain or "fan" by an aggrading system of braided streams diverging to the north and east from an apex in south-central Utah . . . the member was derived mainly from sedimentary rocks. The Salt Wash deposits grade from predominantly coarse texture at the apex of the "fan" to predominantly fine texture at the margin of the "fan" . . . the Brushy Basin member consists mainly of variegated claystone with a few lenticular conglomeratic sandstone strata . . . It consists of sediments formed in fluvial and lacustrine environments and contains large amounts of clay, part of which is bentonitic and was probably

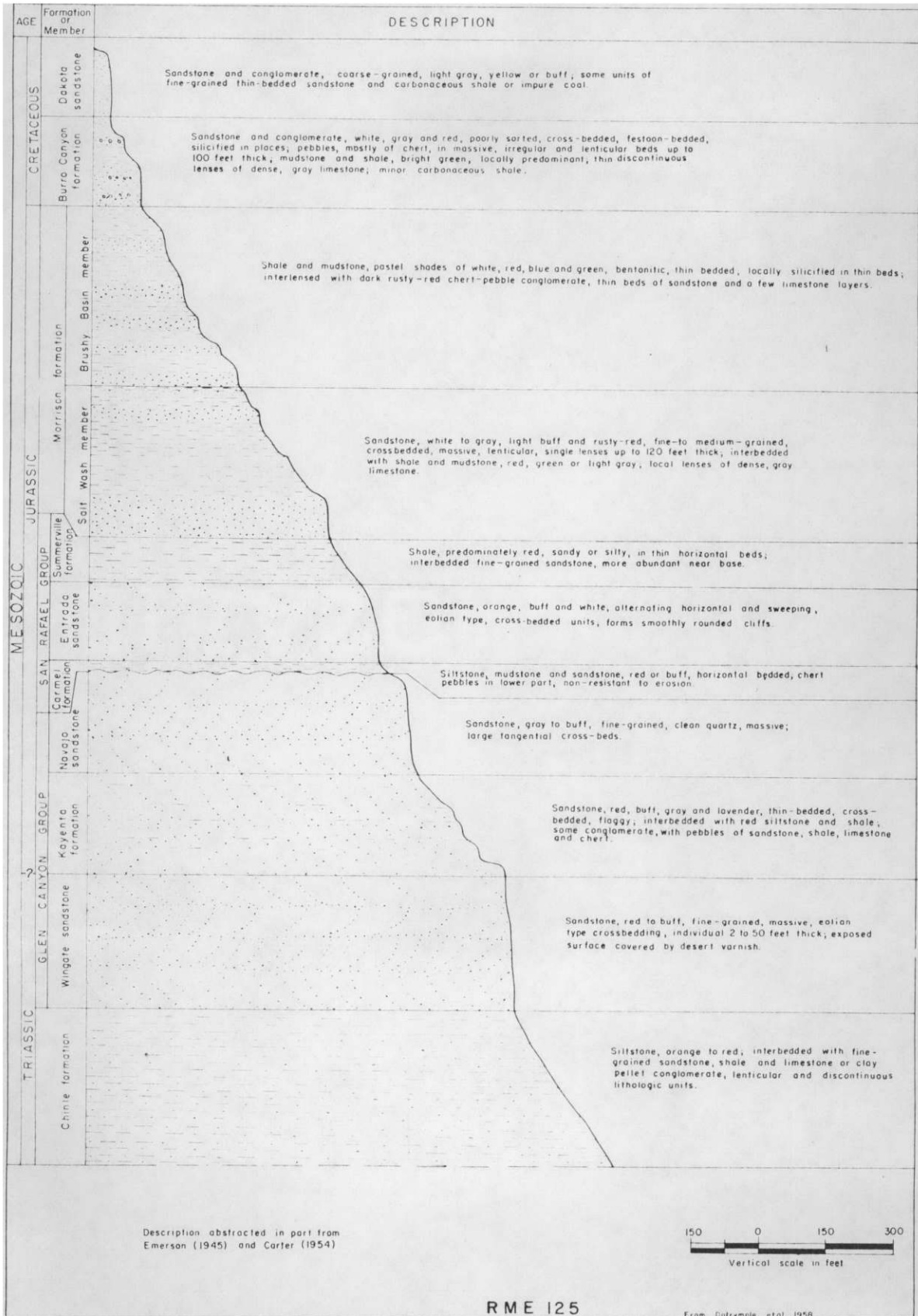


Figure 2. Geologic column, Bull Canyon, Colorado



derived from falls of volcanic ash. The source area for many of the fluvial deposits of the Brushy Basin member may have been the same as that for the Salt Wash member . . ." (Craig and others, 1955, pp. 125-126).

The Uravan Belt crosses a series of northwest-trending salt anticlines within the Paradox Basin. The north end of the Belt trends west to northwest, subparallel to the anticlines, but the southern part crosses the anticlines nearly at right angles. The crests of the Paradox and Gypsum Valley anticlines have collapsed and most of the collapsed blocks have been removed by erosion. Commercial uranium deposits occur in some of the dropped blocks of Salt Wash sandstone in Little Gypsum Valley and Paradox Valley.

#### LITHOLOGIC AND SEDIMENTARY FEATURES RELATED TO ORE DEPOSITS

The Salt Wash member is a series of fluvial mudstone and sandstone lenses. The sandstone lenses crop out in three to eight cliffs or "rims" with intervening mudstone slopes. The uppermost rim contains most of the ore deposits, but some occur in lower sandstone lenses. There are a few ore deposits in coarse conglomeratic sandstones at the base of the overlying Brushy Basin member. Individual sandstone lenses may be traced for as much as half a mile along the outcrop (fig. 3), and lenses as much as 2 miles wide and more than 6 miles long have been traced by drilling. Larger ore deposits normally occur near the edge of the thicker sandstone units where there is transition to a sandy mudstone.

The sandstone lenses are separated laterally by areas of higher ratios of mudstone to sandstone and vertically by fairly persistent mudstone beds. The sandstone lenses represent the coarse material deposited in scoured-out stream channels and vary in direction of elongation from northeast to east to southeast. These are normally the lenses which constitute favorable ore-bearing ground. The channel sandstones are characterized by poor sorting, angular conglomerates, and an intricate pattern of sedimentary structures such as torrential cross-bedding, scour and fill features, interbedded thin mudstones, contorted bedding, and even brecciation. The latter features are probably due to compaction and slumpage contemporaneous with deposition and consolidation. Mudstone lenses a few inches thick and mudstone "galls" and angular fragments are common within the sandstone units.

Near ore deposits the outcropping sandstone units are normally pale to light yellow-brown or tan and speckled with brown limonite stain. Mudstone lenses within the host rock are gray to gray-green, and the top of a mudstone unit underlying a sandstone lense is normally bleached from red-brown to gray-green for a vertical distance of 6 inches to 5 feet. Slickensides and brecciation slump structures are common in the mudstones, particularly along the edges of the thicker sandstone lenses and in "roll" type deposits. Some mudstone units are highly uraniumiferous and are mined as ore. Hard barren sandstone pods, cemented with calcite, often border part of the deposit or surround it as an irregular halo 5 to 15 feet away.

#### ORE DEPOSITS

Much of the ore occurs in small pods of only 10 to 500 tons. Clusters of such pods close enough together to be mined as a unit form typical



Fig. 3 Upper ore-bearing sandstone of Salt Wash member, Morrison formation. Sandy mine, Atkinson Mesa, Montrose County, Colorado.

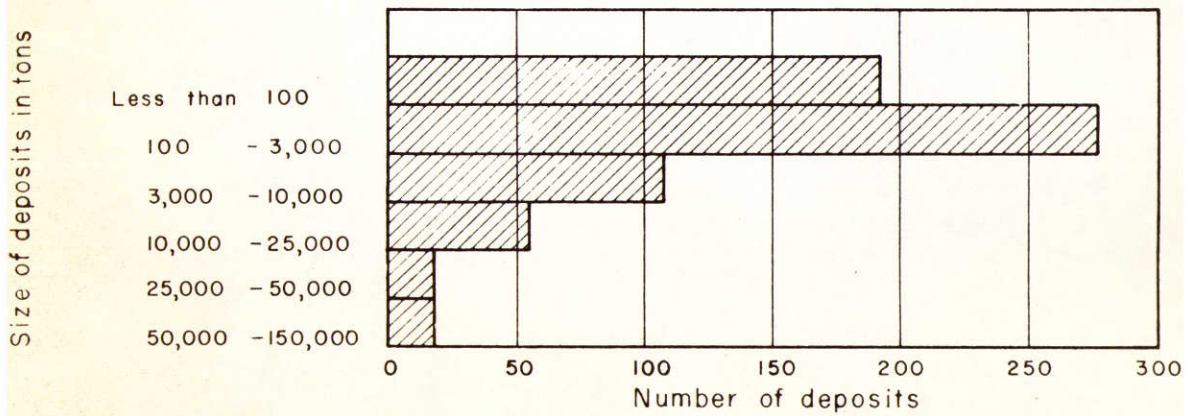


Fig. 4 Size distribution of 666 uranium deposits in the Uravan Mineral Belt

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ore bodies. These ore bodies range up to 150,000 tons, but 70 percent of them are less than 3,000 tons. There are a few continuous ore bodies larger than 25,000 tons in every mining district, but these are not common. Figure 4 shows the statistical distribution of the size ranges of 666 ore deposits.

The average deposit mined is between 2 and 9 feet thick, but in larger deposits the ore may be as much as 30 feet thick. Ore occurs in both bedded and roll type deposits. The bedded type as a flat, pancake shape. The roll type ore bodies are elongate, continuous or contiguous bodies as much as 600 feet long with either an hour-glass or crescent cross-section (fig. 5). They are usually as thick, normal to the bedding, as they are wide. The rolls often display color banding and faint curved fractures parallel to the banding. Normally the concave surface of a C or crescent, roll faces the thicker section of the sandstone lens. As described by Shawe (1956), "Many rolls of uranium-vanadium ore show concentric layering parallel to ore surfaces. Commonly, the concave surfaces of rolls show sharp transitions into barren rock, whereas the convex sides of rolls commonly show more gradual transition into barren rock or may even be continuous laterally into tabular ore bodies."

The roll ore bodies are often elongated parallel to the sedimentary trends and parallel to the edges of the sandstone lenses in which they occur.

#### MINERALOGY

Weeks (1956) has described the mineralogy of the uranium-vanadium deposits. Common ore minerals of the unoxidized, black, normally wet deposits are uraninite ( $UO_2 \cdot UO_3$ ), coffinite ( $U(SiO_4)_{1-x}(OH)_{4x}$ ), montroseite ( $VO(OH)$ ), and vanadium hydromica or clay. Carnotite ( $K_2(UO_2)_2(VO_4)_2 \cdot 1-3 H_2O$ ), tyuyamunite ( $Ca(UO_2)_2(VO_4)_2 \cdot 7-10.5 H_2O$ ), corvusite ( $V_2O_4 \cdot 6V_2O_5 \cdot nH_2O$ ), a variety of bright-colored vanadates, and vanadium hydromica or clay are common in oxidized, gray to yellowish-gray, fairly dry, near surface deposits. The ore minerals occur principally as impregnations of sandstone and mudstone with some replacement of carbon, calcite, silica, and clay.

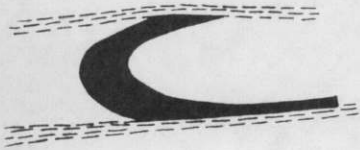
Bulk of the ore mined has been from oxidized deposits. Average grade is 0.28 percent  $U_3O_8$  and 1.62 percent  $V_2O_5$ . The ratio of uranium to vanadium varies from 1:4 at the north end of the Uravan Belt to 1:8 at the south end.

According to Shawe, Simmons and Archbold (1957, p. 59-60), ore deposits in the Slick Rock district also contain about 0.07 percent copper, 0.018 percent lead, 0.0014 percent cobalt 0.0008 percent nickel, 0.022 percent zinc, 0.021 percent arsenic, 0.0044 percent molybdenum, and less than 0.0001 percent antimony.

#### ORIGIN OF THE DEPOSITS

Despite intensive study of the Uravan Mineral Belt by numerous geologists, there is no general agreement as to origin of the uraniferous deposits.

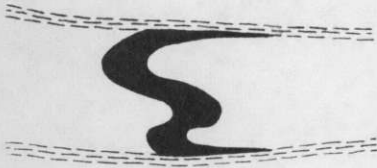
Waters and Granger (1953) believe that the uranium may have been derived from rhyolitic tuffs in the Brushy Basin member, or from Tertiary hydrothermal solutions; Shawe, Simmons and Archbold (1957, p. 63) suggest that heated



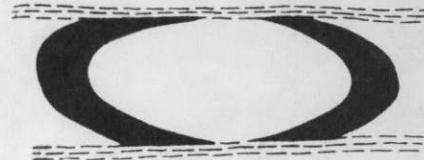
"C" roll



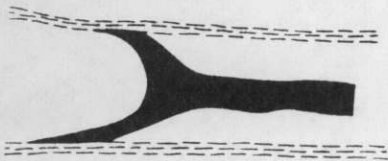
Development of two rolls separated by a thin layer of mudstone



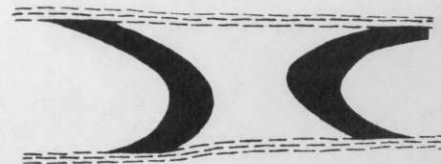
"S" roll



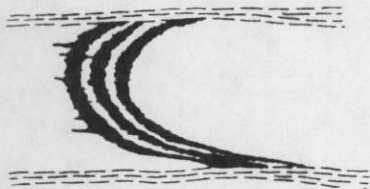
Mirror image "C" rolls; convex loop of roll front



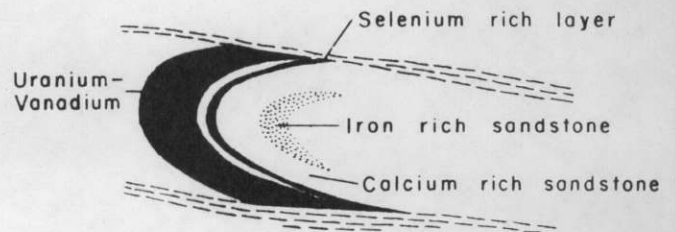
"Socket" roll



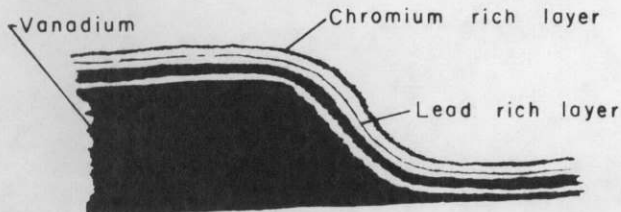
Mirror-image "C" rolls; concave loop of roll front



Concentric layering in "C" roll



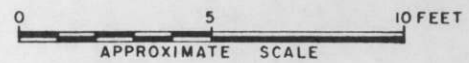
Asymmetry of minor element distribution in Salt Wash member ore body



Asymmetry of minor element distribution in Navajo(?) formation ore body  
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EXPLANATION

-  Ore
-  Mudstone
-  Sandstone



From D.R. Shawe, U.S.G.S. Prof. Paper 300, 1955

Figure 5. Cross-sections of roll ore deposits

connate water leached uranium from detrital heavy minerals in sedimentary rocks. Concentration of the uranium content of ground waters in the host rock, by evaporation and plant transpiration during Morrison time, is suggested by Phoenix (1958, p. 416). A hydrothermal source from the La Sal Mountain intrusives, or deep-seated intrusives, has been suggested by many geologists, and Reinhardt (1952, pp. 4-7) has described the Uravan deposits as forming part of two disconnected rings around the La Sal Mountains.

The ore solutions may have been connate, meteoric, hydrothermal, or groundwater, or any of these commingled. In the Salt Wash, the movement of solutions was lateral through the host sandstone, with the flow controlled by the permeability of the rock (Phoenix, 1956). Permeability was largely controlled by lithology, although in some cases it appears to have been increased by fractures.

Precipitation of the ore minerals appears to have been caused by change in equilibrium of the transporting solutions largely through changes in the oxidation state, or acidity, of the solution. This could have been caused by carbon (reduction and increase in acidity), decrease in pressure associated with constriction in the solution pathways (exsolution of volatiles) (Roach and Wallace, 1957), or precipitation at an interface between solutions of different composition and density (Shaw, 1956).

#### EXPLORATION AND MINING METHODS AND COSTS

Most deposits were discovered by prospectors searching the outcrops of Salt Wash sandstone for radioactivity and for coloring by oxidized uranium and vanadium minerals. The outcrops have been thoroughly prospected, and various geophysical and geochemical techniques have given negative or inconclusive results. Prospecting is now largely limited to drilling or drifting. Most of the exploration has been carried on where the Salt Wash has lithologic characteristics considered favorable for occurrence of ore deposits, and is at a depth of less than 400 feet.

Criteria of favorable ground (fig. 6) vary from area to area, but the characteristics first used by geologists of the U. S. Geological Survey (Weir, 1952), and now used with some modifications by mining companies, are generally applicable. A table of favorability criteria is established for each area and a relative value is assigned to each lithologic feature in order that a number value for favorability may be assigned to each hole drilled. Favorability standards are established from experience in an area, and these are the bases for delineation of favorable ground for additional drilling of offset or in-between holes. The following is a hypothetical example of criteria for the upper sandstone unit. The importance of criteria and their values will vary from area to area:

	<u>Value</u>
1. Composite thickness of the upper sandstone unit	
Thickness 30 to 60 feet	10
Thickness greater than 60 feet	6
Thickness 15 to 30 feet	6



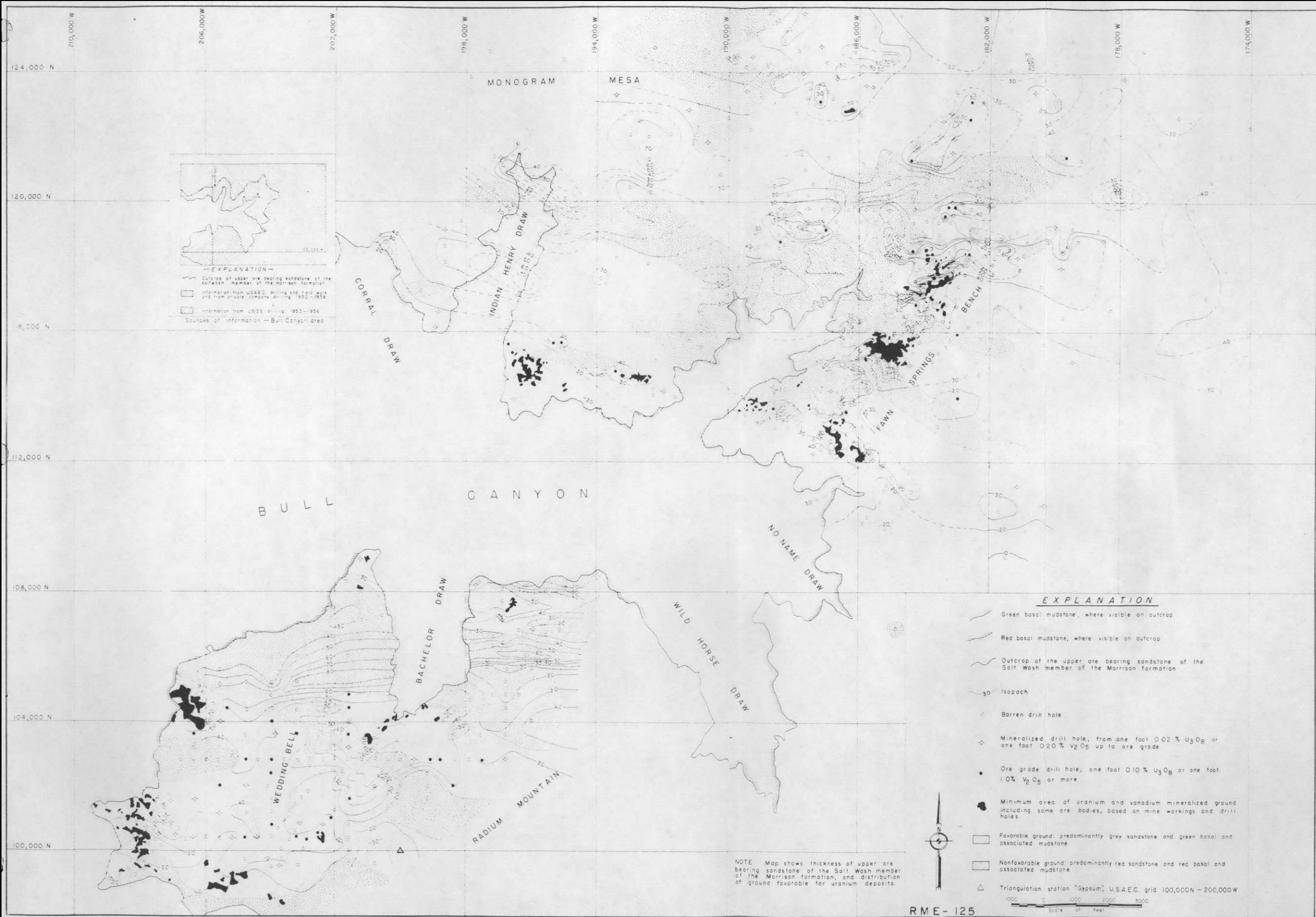


Figure 6. Favorability and isopach map of the upper ore bearing sandstone, Bull Canyon area, Montrose and San Miguel Counties, Colorado



	<u>Value</u>
2. Color of sandstone host rock	
Light gray with greenish-gray mudstone splits and stringers	7
Light gray and massive	5
Light brown and massive with limonite speckling	3
3. Color and thickness of mudstones either over or under the potential host rock	
Greenish-gray mudstone 4 feet thick or thicker	7
Greenish-gray mudstone 1 to 4 feet thick	5
Greenish-gray mudstone less than 1 foot thick	3
4. Clay pebble conglomerate bed or a mixture of mudstone and sandstone indicating slump structure or turbulent deposition	
5 feet thick or more	5
1 to 5 feet thick	2
5. Abundance of woody carbon as trash, logs or stringers	5
Scattered carbon	2
6. Ratio of sandstone to mudstone of 2:1 to 3:1 in the upper unit	4
7. Host rock at or below water table	4
8. Abundance of gypsum seams filling fractures or bedding planes	3
9. Ribs or knobs of hard calcareous sandstone	3

The sum criteria-values in each hole provides a figure for a favorability contour map of the area. The summation number may classify the hole as follows: 34 to 48 favorable; 20 to 34 semi-favorable, and below 20 unfavorable.

Favorable ground may also be delineated statistically by grid drilling an area with holes spaced 200 to 400 feet apart. If a certain percentage of the holes are found to be ore or mineralized, the entire area drilled is considered favorable; if not, the area is abandoned.

Exploration drilling is normally carried out in three stages: First, wide space grid drilling, with holes 500 to 1,000 feet apart, is used to delineate favorable areas. Within the favorable areas, second stage holes are located 75 to 500 feet apart, depending upon the target size, to locate mineralized ground. In the third stage, offset holes are drilled around the ore or mineralized holes to delineate ore. Square grid patterns are common, but a diamond grid is often used with the acute angle in the direction of ore trends.

Economic factors impose a limit on depth of mining and exploration. Table 1 gives representative costs for mining various sized ore bodies at various depths. Unless ore has been found, spacing holes at less than half the drilling depth is generally impractical, but exceptions occur,

Table 1 - Minimum size ore body that can be mined profitably at various depths, Uravan Mineral Belt

Size <u>1/</u> (tons)	Depth (ft.)	Drill hole spacing			Cost per ton		Equipment Cost <u>4/</u>	Cost of shaft or incline	Cost per ton	Gross Value <sup>5/</sup>
		1st Stage (ft.)	2nd Stage (ft.)	3rd Stage (ft.)	Expl. Drlg. <sup>2/</sup>	Min- ing <sup>3/</sup>				
1,500	75-100	500	80	40-20	\$5	\$12-15	\$ 8,000	\$ 6,000 (incline)	\$26.33 to 28.33	42,750
5,000	150-180	500	150	75-50	5	12-15	20,000	18,000 (incline)	24.60 to 27.60	142,500
10,000	350-400	500	200	125	5	11-14	40,000	50,000 (shaft)	25.00 to 28.00	285,000
20,000	600-700	1,000	300	150	5	11-14	75,000	100,000 (shaft)	24.75 to 27.75	570,000
-ft- 50,000	1,000-1,200	1,000	500	250	5	11-14	150,000	275,000 (shaft)	24.50 to 27.50	1,425,000

Explanation:

- 1/ Average thickness 3 feet; grade 0.25% U<sub>3</sub>O<sub>8</sub>, 1.25% V<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>; weight 2 tons/cu. yd.
- 2/ Exploration drilling costs include 1st through 3rd stages.
- 3/ Mining costs include labor, supplies, engineering, ventilation, pumping, camp maintenance and operating overhead; but do not include equipment, development, royalties, or interest.
- 4/ No allowance is included for equipment salvage.
- 5/ AEC Circular 5 revised value \$28.50 per ton (exclusive of initial production bonus).

dependent on variations in drilling costs and on estimated size of ore target. If ore is not encountered nor a strongly mineralized area delineated by the minimum spacing of the second drilling stage, then the area is usually abandoned because exploration costs at that depth would be excessive in proportion to value of the ore body.

The cost of drilling depends on the type and depth (table 2).

Depth	Cost per Foot		
	Wagon Drilling	Non-core Rotary	Core Drilling
To 100 ft.	\$0.50	\$1.85	\$2.50
200	0.90	1.85	2.50
300		1.85	3.00
400		1.85	4.00
500		1.85	4.50
600		1.85	4.75
1,000		2.40	6.00

Table 2 - Representative drilling costs in the  
Uravan Mineral Belt. January 1958

Where the host rock is less than 200 feet deep and the ground is fairly dry, air percussion drilling (wagon drilling) is usually employed. Cuttings may be collected for a chemical assay, but the normal practice is only to probe the hole with a Geiger counter.

Where the host rock is 200 to 600 feet deep, rotary drilling with roller bits is commonly used. Hole diameters vary from 3 to 5 inches and the holes are probed with Geiger counters. The anticipated ore horizon, which normally includes the lower 40 to 80 feet, is usually cored. Whenever possible, air is used as a circulating medium since water causes the hole to cave. Furthermore, wet holes must be logged immediately after drilling or the logging probe will not descend freely, and may be stuck and lost.

When wet ground is encountered or when drilling deeper than 600 feet, water is used as the circulating medium. Where drilling is carried out in untested areas and geologic information is desired, diamond core drilling is often used. Water, sometimes mixed with drilling muds, is used as a circulating medium.

Radiometric logging of drill holes with Geiger and scintillation probes has been used extensively since 1954. Most logging units are small hand-operated reels with which a gamma-ray detector is lowered into the hole. The radioactivity is registered on a meter at the surface. Larger units that automatically record the depth and radioactivity on a permanent strip log (Stead, 1956) are preferable for quantitative results. For greatest accuracy the instruments must be carefully calibrated in model holes where ore of known thickness and grade is used as a standard. Less accurate calibration may be achieved by comparing the gamma ray log with the radiometric and chemical assays of a number of cored holes in the

same area. The model holes used by the AEC, which are available to the public, have a  $2\frac{1}{2}$ -foot radius of ore, which for all practical purposes is an approach to infinity.

Models with a lesser radius of ore do not duplicate the volume of radioactive material which influences the counting rate of the detector in exploration bore holes. The greater count recorded from a larger mass, of same grade, in the exploration hole is usually erroneously interpreted to mean higher grade.

Selective mining is essential in the Uravan Mineral Belt. Mining methods vary from scraping out rich pockets with hand tools and hauling the ore out by wheelbarrow, to mechanized drilling, loading and hauling operations. Mule-drawn mine carts have been common, but are being replaced by diesel-powered, rubber-tired "Scoot-cretes" of one to two-ton capacity. Most of the major producers use small rail-mounted, air-powered muckers, and rail haulage with one- to three-ton cars pulled by compressed air or electric trams. Jackleg type drills are usually used for drilling blast holes. Operations range from two men mining 2 to 5 tons per day, to 40 men mining 100 tons per day. Production depends on the amount of development work that has to be done, the hauling distance and the method of entry.

Mining costs are fairly standard for the major producers. Table 1 gives representative costs for mining ore bodies of various sizes at various depths. Direct mining costs are about \$9.00 to \$12.00 per ton, exclusive of exploration, amortization and depreciation. Indirect mining costs, exclusive of exploration drilling, range up to \$5.00 per ton. More than half of the mines are operated by small mining companies. Three large companies control the remainder. The mining companies may own or lease their properties. Royalty to the claim owners ranges from 10 percent to 30 percent. The small claim owner may lease his property for a royalty and the lessee becomes the controlling operator. The large companies usually operate their own or controlled property by contracting for surface drilling, road building and shaft sinking. After the orebody has been defined by drilling and access provided by shaft or incline, the mining is often by contract for a percentage payment of the gross ore receipts. This ranges from 50 percent to 70 percent depending on the size and grade of the ore body. The contractor may be reimbursed for a portion of his costs by additional payments per foot of underground development work. The contract-miner system produces a great number and variety of small mining operations.

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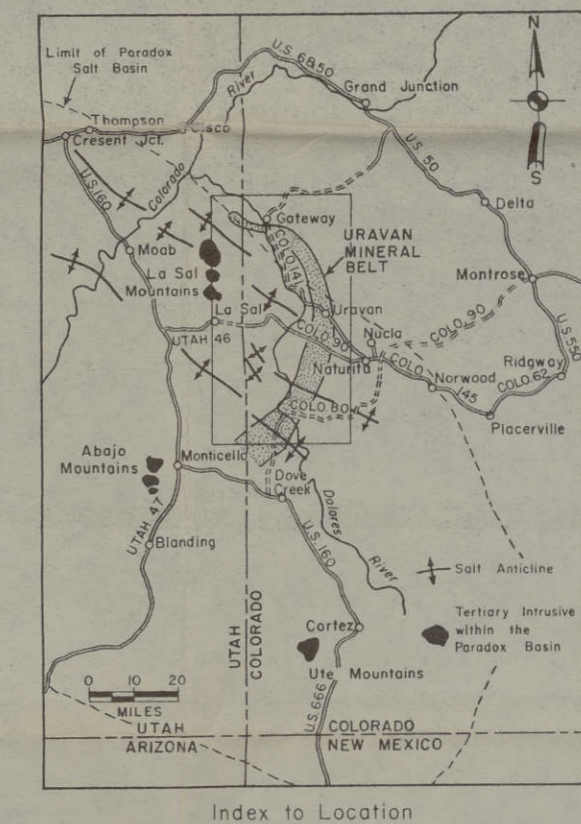


# Fig. 1 URANIUM-VANADIUM DEPOSITS of the URAVAN MINERAL BELT

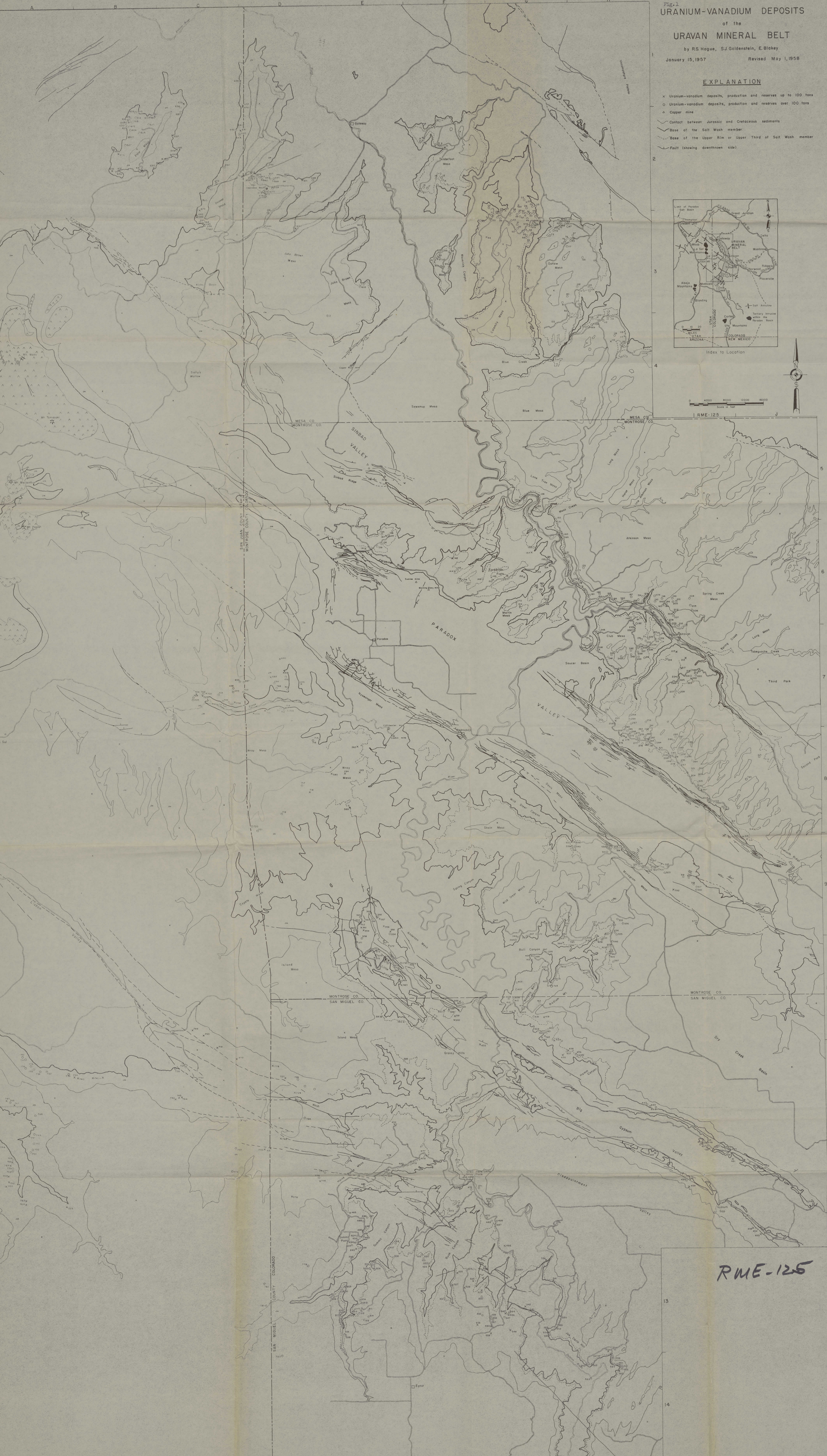
by R.S. Hogue, S.J. Goldenstein, E. Blakely  
January 15, 1957      Revised May 1, 1958

## EXPLANATION

- × Uranium-vanadium deposits, production and reserves up to 100 tons
- Uranium-vanadium deposits, production and reserves over 100 tons
- △ Copper mine
- Contact between Jurassic and Cretaceous sediments
- Base of the Salt Wash member
- Base of the Upper Rim or Upper Third of Salt Wash member
- - - Fault (showing downthrown side)



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100	199	199	199

RME-125





