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Agency cites complex issues; firm frustrated by slow pace

US delays report on Rosemont mine plan

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By Tony Davis Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Tuesday, October 20, 2009 12:00 am | Comments

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The U.S. Forest Service won't meet its November deadline for releasing an environmental document about the proposed Rosemont Mine, and officials said on Monday that they don't know when the report will be released.

The delay, based on the project's complex issues, comes after months of emotionally charged controversy over the \$900 million mine proposed for the Santa Rita Mountains about 30 miles southeast of Tucson. The proposal has generated a raft of critical statements written by officials from various agencies reviewing alternatives for the mine. If approved, it would become the third- or fourth-largest copper mine in the United States. The document's release has been delayed once previously from the original March 2009 release date.

Any delay has to be at least a mild setback for the Rosemont Copper Co. It has pointed to the federal government's schedule for the Rosemont project in literature being used to raise capital to build it. However, service officials said on Monday they don't know if the July 2010 scheduled date for making a decision on the project will be delayed.

Rosemont Vice President Jamie Sturgess said he doesn't know if this delay will affect the company's financing efforts. Few observers were surprised by the delay, given the increased buildup of issues about the project.

"I'm frustrated by the slow process, but it doesn't mean I'm troubled by it," said Sturgess, the company's vice president for sustainable development. "There are no shortcuts to complex issues. We've got additional technical studies we've been asked to provide, and there's a pretty comprehensive list of information the service is grappling with. It's to everyone's benefit to have the study be thorough and comprehensive."

The delay is positive because it will produce a more-detailed review and because it will cost Rosemont more time and money, said Gayle Hartmann, president of Save the Scenic Santa Ritas, an activist group opposing Rosemont.

"We didn't think they could possibly get it together. This is a very complicated (environmental impact statement), and the county had asked for a lot of information that hadn't been supplied," said Hartmann.

The fiercest criticism among reviewing agencies has by far come from Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry, who has, among other things, called for a review of the validity of Rosemont Copper's mining claims on the project.

Huckelberry also has suggested replacing the proposed Rosemont open pit mine with an underground mine that would end up tunneling the mine wastes through the mountains and shipping them by rail across a swath of land south of Tucson to the existing Twin Buttes mining complex near Green Valley. He has attacked Rosemont's public mailings on the mine. He has raised concerns that the open pit could capture runoff that otherwise would flow to neighboring canyons such as the now-relatively pristine Davidson Canyon.

In a letter to the Forest Service in July, Huckelberry accused its officials of short-circuiting deliberations on the Rosemont project in a rush to judgment. The various studies being conducted for the project aren't being done in time to help officials develop a full analysis of alternatives for the mining project, the administrator wrote the service at the end of August. The heart of the Rosemont controversy is the idea that public lands are being used as a dumping ground for mine wastes, he wrote.

On Monday, service officials said they're taking a hard look at ideas raised by the public and agencies, and haven't ruled out any of them, including Huckelberry's rail line idea.

Coronado National Forest Supervisor Jeanine Derby denied, however, that the environmental document is being delayed indefinitely, because that suggests the service doesn't have a schedule for the environmental review. Derby said that isn't true.

"This is a very complex project. It's requiring data collection, surveys and such longer in coming than we anticipated," said Mindy Roth, a special assistant to Derby on Rosemont. "As we work through the analysis process, sometimes those data needs are not identified upfront. We identify them as we're going along, and sometimes these things can't be anticipated a year, or a year and a half, in advance as you're putting the initial schedules together."

The service has put together a team of 15 to 20 scientists and others from various disciplines to study the Rosemont plan.

"This is a new type of project for many of the Forest Service employees involved," Roth said. "We have a lot of learning about the mining industry

and techniques to do, to be able to do a complete and adequate evaluation of the proposal and other alternatives."

The Tohono O'odham Nation, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the town of Sahuarita and the Arizona Department of Water Resources have also raised questions or concerns about the Rosemont proposal to remove 220 million pounds of copper a year for the next 20 years from a site west of Arizona 83 in the Santa Ritas.

The tribe wrote that various alternatives under study for storing waste rock and tailings at the site are unacceptable, given the area's significant cultural resources. The Tohono O'odham believe the various artifacts should be protected as part of a Santa Rita Mountains Traditional Cultural Place.

Game and Fish expressed concern the Forest Service appears likely to dismiss some alternative proposals because they are "cost prohibitive," but said any issues must also be evaluated based on the costs to the public.

For instance, the idea of shipping wastes off public lands appears technically feasible but costs too much in the eyes of some, but the savings obtained by the company by placing wastes on public lands are directly transferred to the American public in environmental costs, Game and Fish said.

Sturgess described the idea of shipping mine wastes to Twin Buttes as "the kind of alternative best described as fantasy. We don't have any interest in the Twin Buttes property. We don't own it." As for the underground mine idea, "we believe that the most economically feasible way to develop the 50 million tons of ore we've got is through a modern open pit."

"I'm frustrated by the slow process, but it doesn't mean I'm troubled by it. There are no shortcuts to complex issues."

Jamie Sturgess,

Rosemont vice president

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