

Lakes Commission mulls stance on Rock Creek mine

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Panel hears from both sides on mine issue

SANDPOINT -- Idaho's Lakes Commission heard a tale of two mines on Wednesday.

One mine would be so technologically sophisticated and tightly regulated that it poses no threat to wildlife habitat or water quality. It would also provide resources everybody needs and stimulate rural economies.

The other mine would fracture wildlife habitat and pollute the Clark Fork River and Lake Pend Oreille long after it closes and developers and investors have cut and run with their riches.

Both mines are actually one in the same -- the proposed Rock Creek mining project in northwestern Montana. Which mine is fact and which is fiction continues to be hotly debated.

Some of that debate played out before the Lake Pend Oreille, Pend Oreille River, Priest Lake and Priest River Commission on Wednesday when it asked Revett Minerals and the Rock Creek Alliance to outline their positions on the polarizing project.

Revett officials used a colorful PowerPoint presentation to paint a flattering image of the copper and silver mining proposal, which involves tunneling beneath the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness near Noxon to extract copper and silver ore.

"If you're inside the wilderness, you're not going to be able to see a mine is underneath," said Carson Rife, Revett's vice president of operations.

The material would be processed using conventional mining methods at a site near the wilderness boundary. The product would be loaded into rail cars destined for a smelter outside the Inland Northwest, while the waste material would be converted into a paste and conveyed to an impoundment area less than a half-mile from the Clark Fork River.

Wastewater from the mine would be pumped through a two-phase treatment system and discharged into the Clark Fork using a perforated diffuser pipe placed on the river's bottom. The discharge rate would be about 5 cubic feet per second in a river that has an average daily flow of 20,000 cfs, according to Rife.

Revett also pointed out that the mine will create several hundred jobs, some of which will attract job-seekers in the Panhandle. The company also estimates the project will generate \$220 million annually in taxes and goods and services.

"We're starting something here that benefits everyone," said Bill Orchow, CEO of Revett Minerals.

Revett officials insist the treated wastewater will meet stringent drinking water standards and the mostly-sand mine tailings will be "environmentally benign."

Revett faced a tough crowd, which appeared to consist mainly of mine opponents. Most of those who spoke during the three-hour affair did not cotton to Revett's declarations and rosy predictions. Some accused the company of lying about the prospect of acid mine drainage, which happens when sulfide-laden rock is exposed to water. Others lambasted the questionable corporate track records of various figures who have been or are still involved with the mine's development.

Some of the meeting's most pointed comments came from Bonner County Commission Chairwoman Marcia Phillips, who accused Revett of threatening one of the Panhandle's most cherished resources -- Lake Pend Oreille -- in order to line their pockets and the pockets of people who have no stake in the community.

"I have no reason to trust you; you have given me no reason to trust you," said Phillips.

Rock Creek Alliance Executive Director Mary Mitchell employed only a textbook-sized environmental impact statement during her presentation to the Lakes Commission. Between an unlined tailings impoundment area, the discharge and stormwater runoff, pollution will ultimately wind up in the lake, she said, adding that the adulteration will continue long after the mine is played out.

"It's not going to stop after 30 years," said Mitchell. "It's pretty clear Lake Pend Oreille is going to be polluted."

Revett officials said the mine would have a substantial reclamation bond in the event of a problem or the company's bankruptcy. But Ford Elsaesser, chairman of the Lakes Commission, said such bonding was "overrated."

"If the damage is done, the damage is done," he said.

The commission is expected to formulate a position on the Rock Creek proposal when it meets next. But at least one commissioner said Revett's presentations left her with more questions than answers and she would likely take an opposition stance.

"Because there are more questions than answers, I don't think we can take the risk," said Commissioner Linda Mitchell.