

Mine opinion nearing completion

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SANDPOINT -- A new biological opinion on the proposed Rock Creek mining project in northwestern Montana is expected early next year, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The document identifies potential impacts to bull trout and grizzly bear and ways of mitigating them, and is an essential element of permitting for the controversial silver and copper mining proposal.

"We're making progress on it," said Mark Wilson, field supervisor for Fish and Wildlife's Division of Ecological Services in Montana. "It will be after the first of the year before we get it done."

Wilson said he didn't have a more definitive time estimate because the agency is still in consultation with the U.S. Forest Service on the mitigation package. The document will then be reviewed by Fish and Wildlife's regional office in Denver and then its headquarters in Washington, D.C., he said.

A federal judge nullified a previous biological opinion earlier this year because it failed to adequately weigh the impacts to bull trout and grizzly, both of which are protected under the federal Endangered Species Act. The ruling was the product of a lawsuit filed by a half-dozen environmental groups, including the Sandpoint-based Rock Creek Alliance.

It was the second time the document has been remanded back to Fish and Wildlife for further study. Wilson said the agency is keen on completing the new biological opinion.

"It's a substantial document that's taken a lot of our time and so we're anxious to finish this one and get on to other things," he said.

Meantime, there are newspaper reports that commissioners in Lincoln County, Mont. plan to join Revett Minerals' efforts to team up with the Forest Service in defending the mining proposal in court.

The Western News in Libby reported earlier this month that commissioners hope to intervene in the lawsuit.

Revett's motion to intervene in the suit has been granted, although the Rock Creek Alliance doubts the commission has standing to enter the legal fray.

"Having Lincoln County piggyback on that motion to intervene that Revett filed for political purposes is not a legally legitimate means for getting involved in a lawsuit," said Mary Mitchell, executive director of the Rock Creek Alliance.

