

Mine plan scrutinized by Idaho lawmakers

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North Idaho legislators have expressed 'grave concerns' about Montana mine

Boise—Despite urging from a mining company, a legislative committee withheld support on Wednesday for the proposed Rock Creek Mine until it has more information about possible environmental impacts on North Idaho, including possible changes to habitat for grizzlies.

"The only thing that's going to set us free here is good solid science," said Rep. Eric Anderson, R—Priest Lake. "I don't want to continue having a discussion about one side says this."

Anderson's comments came after a presentation to the Joint Legislative Environmental Common Sense Committee by Revett Silver Co., the Spokane Valley-based company looking to develop a mine on a Montana tributary of the Clark Fork River upstream from Lake Pend Oreille. The committee last year heard a presentation from Post Falls Mayor Clay Larkin, who was critical of the mine and its impacts.

Anderson, a member of the joint committee, urged it to look into the mine issue last year, after the House Resource Committee in 2004 refused to introduce a resolution pushed by North Idaho lawmakers expressing "grave concerns" about the mine. At that time, Resources Committee members said they were reluctant to tell another state what to do.

Proposed in 1987, Rock Creek Mine is controversial due to concerns over the effects it would have on water quality and wildlife in the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness Area. The latest hang-up came when a federal judge ruled the mine could displace grizzlies and said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service erred in 2003 when it gave the mine permits.

Carson Rife, Revett's vice president of operations, said misconceptions about the proposed mine have led to unfair judgments about the effects on the surrounding area.

Committee Chairman Sen. Hal Bunderson, R—Meridan, said the company's presentation appeared to dispel most concerns about the proposed mine, but he said the state Department of Environmental Quality needs to present the facts to the committee.

Revett president Bill Orchow said the company is eager for the public to know the truth.

"I think the perception of what that project is has been lost," Orchow said. "The facts are available—they're out in public record."

Revett's presentation detailed the cost of the project, its economic impacts and the mitigation plan drafted for the grizzly population. The project, Rife said, would bring 300 jobs to the Troy, Mont., area and would cost between \$150 million and \$200 million—\$2.3 million of that for the mitigation plan.

The plan involves purchasing 2,450 acres as habitat replacement for grizzlies, as ordered by the federal government after the judge's ruling in March. The mine would disrupt 482 acres, Rife said.

He said the plan to help the grizzly population is extensive, and that opposing the mine would mean not helping the grizzlies.

"If the mine doesn't go forward, the mitigation is not going to be there," Rife said.

He emphasized that Revett doesn't need permission from Idaho to move forward with the project because it is based in Montana. But "we want to try to be good neighbors," he said.

Bunderson said it's important for Idaho to communicate with Montana about the facts regarding the proposed mine and about the environmental standards to which the company would be held.

"We just need to make sure we've dotted the i and crossed the t," Bunderson said.