

Troy Mine cave-in raises doubts at Rock Creek mine

By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian

TROY - Generally speaking, a hole in the ground is not a problem at an underground mine, which is, after all, a hole in the ground.

But an unexpected cave-in at the Troy Mine this spring has raised doubts about the future of a controversial mine proposal nearby.

In approving the Rock Creek mine - which would tunnel beneath the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness - Forest Service officials pointed to the Troy Mine as a good example of what might be expected.

Responding to cave-in or subsidence concerns, officials noted the existing Troy Mine provided "an excellent analogy for the proposed Rock Creek mining method and risks of subsidence."

The geology is much the same at the two sites, they said, as is the mining method proposed.

Because the mine near Troy had never experienced problems with subsidence, officials concluded the possibility of a cave-in at Rock Creek would be "remote."

But that was before the first week of May, when the roof rained down on a portion of the Troy Mine.

Now conservationists are asking the agency to reconsider its position, saying that such a ground disturbance in the wilderness would be unacceptable.

"It's one thing at Troy," said Matt Clifford. "In the wilderness, that's just a whole different ball of wax."

Subsidence there, he said, could have dramatic consequences. A vast hole could form in a matter of minutes. An entire wilderness lake could drain underground.

Clifford is conservation director and staff attorney for the Clark Fork Coalition, a group that has been watch-dogging the Rock Creek proposal from the beginning. Late last month, he fired off a letter to Kootenai National Forest officials on behalf of several environmental groups, asking that forest supervisor Bob Castaneda "reconsider" his approval of the wilderness mine.

So far, they've received no reply to the June 28 letter, but Cami Winslow - who is temporarily filling in for Castaneda - said Thursday that "we did have a sinkhole, but it has already been filled in by the company."

The company is a subsidiary of Revett Silver Co., the same company planning the Rock Creek mine.

In his letter to forest officials, Clifford cited a May 12 report by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality noting the "roof or back of the mine room collapsed" some years ago, after mining was curtailed at Troy.

The mine recently reopened, and on May 1 a second collapse in the same area brought down debris "with enough noise that two miners at the powder magazines ran eastward about 100 feet to see what the noise was about."

What it was about was a "shallow collapse" of surface earth, which deepened on May 6 to about 50 feet deep and 30 feet across. Surface water was running into the hole at about 5 gallons per minute.

That's not the sort of hole anyone anticipated for the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness, Clifford said, least of all officials who used Troy as "an excellent analogy."

State regulators concluded preliminarily "that mining reached weakened rock," allowing the roof to fall in from the bottom up, until the ground above finally fell in.

They gave the mining company one month to call an independent expert, and to craft both a formal report and a reclamation plan.

Subsequent to that initial report, DEQ authorized the company to fill the hole. Forest Service officials, meanwhile, are awaiting a final report on exactly what happened at Troy and how it might affect their earlier approval of Rock Creek.

But for Clifford, the new hole in the ground remains troubling, representing a possible hint of things to come.

Writing on behalf of the Clark Fork Coalition, as well as the Rock Creek Alliance, Cabinet Resource Group, Montana Wilderness Association, Montana Environmental Information Center, Great Bear Foundation, Earthworks and the Idaho Council of Trout Unlimited, Clifford keyed on the fact that Castaneda had grounded his Rock Creek approval on the history at Troy.

The new mine would "use the same mining method as employed at Troy," Castaneda wrote in his decision, and would "mine the same rock type." In his June 2003 approval, Castaneda concluded that "there is no indication that subsidence will be an issue either now or in the future."

"Obviously," Clifford wrote, "the last sentence above is no longer true."

"When the mine your experts consider an 'excellent analogy' for Rock Creek begins experiencing subsidence," Clifford wrote, "it is time to re-assess the conclusion that subsidence will likely not be a problem at Rock Creek."

Clifford and others have wasted no opportunity to point out that the ground above the Rock Creek mine is designated wilderness, the highest level of protection afforded by law.

"A sinkhole of the magnitude seen at Troy would be an unacceptable impact," he wrote, "and even more so because of the potential to drain fragile surface waters and upset the hydrological balance within the wilderness."

Even without the specter of subsidence, the Rock Creek mine has encountered any number of hurdles on the way to development. As proposed, it would yield an estimated 10,000 tons of copper and silver ore per day for 35 years.

It also would come with many miles of roads in the Cabinets, as well as railroad stations, pipelines, power lines, a tailings treatment plant and other infrastructure on more than 1,500 acres. The mine has, perhaps not surprisingly, been the focus of several lawsuits.

It also received national attention last year when jewelry retailer Tiffany and Co. entered the fray, running an advertisement in the Washington Post opposing the tunnel beneath the wilderness.

In March, U.S. District Court Judge Donald Molloy put the mine on hold, ruling that federal wildlife officials had put grizzly bears and bull trout at risk when they approved the mine.

Molloy decided that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - charged with overseeing implementation of the Endangered Species Act - did not adequately address the possible harm the mine could pose to species protected under that law. The agency, he said, had not included all the available information in making its decision, and should revisit its opinion in light of additional scientific evidence.

That is pretty much what Clifford now wants the Forest Service to do as well.

"When what they're describing is a caving-in of the mine, then I think it's time to re-evaluate their position that the mine won't cave in," he said. "They should withdraw their approval until they can show that subsidence won't be a problem in the wilderness."