

Two cities clash over mining plans

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Nowadays, Mike Noble wanders into his electric shop just to visit and grab a cup of coffee. He opened Noble Electric in 1995 - five years after the mine closed - embarking on a new career path as so many others in Libby, Mont., had to do.

Noble isn't after sympathy. He doesn't say much about the lung condition that forced his early retirement as a business owner, contracted from years of breathing asbestos-laden dust while working as an electrician in the W.R. Grace mine.

In those days, his father, Harvey, was his supervisor. But Harvey became one of the mine's numerous casualties. He succumbed to asbestosis the same year his small northwest Montana community lost its major employer, ending a decades-long vermiculite mining operation that posed catastrophic health consequences that continue surfacing 15 years later among the people of Libby.

"I feel as though (W.R. Grace) knew what was going on. Back then, people were expendable," said Noble, who helped tear down the mine in 1991. "If I'd have known what it was going to do to me, I'd have never worked up there."

Since the closing of the Grace mine, and the subsequent loss of jobs in what was historically Libby's other major industry, logging and milling, the city's economy has struggled, and its unemployment rate remains in the teens.

Given the industry responsible for his scarred lungs and lost friends, some may find it ironic to hear why Noble and a host of other Libby residents made a spring bus trip to lobby Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer. The group asked the governor to support a proposed copper and silver mine near their community - the Montanore Mine.

Noble and others who boarded the bus, like the vast majority of Libby residents, believe the Montanore Mine could be crucial in rejuvenating their city's struggling economy, and this time, mining would be done responsibly.

Travel 84 miles southwest, and you'll find the other half of a tale of two cities unfolding at the border of Idaho and Montana - near the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness, home to pristine waters, threatened bull trout and a small grizzly bear population.

Sandpoint, a northern Idaho community of 7,400, is situated on a crystal mountain lake and would also be impacted by a separate proposed copper and silver operation, the Rock Creek Mine.

But in Sandpoint, city officials worry the mine would hurt their economy with environmental problems, and business owners, residents and local organizations have formed the Rock Creek Alliance to fight it.

The fate of both mines - and the hopes of the two cities - hinges largely on a symbol of the West, the threatened grizzly bear.

If you believe the Fish and Wildlife Service, the mines would lead to no "imminent population decline." On the other hand, environmentalists opposing the mines will tell you they would be a death sentence to an embattled grizzly bear population.

As the crow flies, the proposed mines would be located roughly a mile apart, pinching the narrowest section of the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness. Ore from each mine would be extracted from the same vein running beneath the wilderness area.

Enter the grizzly bear.

Environmental groups sued in both cases, arguing the mines would deal a blow to the federally protected bear population. Both mining proposals are now tied up in court.

The Mantanore Mine, scrapped once and resurrected by Mines Management Inc., still needs a permit. The Rock Creek Mine already has a permit, and it appears unlikely the Fish and Wildlife Service will allow both mines to operate at once.

Sandpoint's perspective

Pilot Bruce Gordon circled over a massive, glassy lake and started his six-seat Cessna's descent toward the Sandpoint Airport.

Below was a tidy tourist destination with upscale lakefront homes surrounded by densely forested mountains.

At the heart of Sandpoint, the seat of Bonner County, is Lake Pend Oreille. It's Idaho's largest natural body of fresh water and one of the most expansive lakes in the West, and locals boast it's so pure enough to drink from.

The lake is more than 50 miles long and so deep, the U.S. Navy uses it to test new submarines. It's fed by the Clark Fork River, a remnant of Glacial Lake Missoula that emptied as the last Ice Age drew to a close.

Pend Oreille yields massive game fish and produced the world record rainbow trout, a 37-pounder caught in 1947 by a man named Wes Hamlet.

After a smooth touchdown on Sandpoint's small airstrip, Gordon paused to soak in his surroundings.

"I've flown all over the country, and this is as wild and scenic a place as there is in the country," Gordon said.

Gordon is the founder of EcoFlight, a program he said is intended to change influential people's minds about development in wild areas by giving them aerial views of patchwork clearcuts, forests riddled with logging roads and other human-caused degradation.

His purpose in Sandpoint on that Aug. 25 visit was to provide reporters with birds-eye views of the proposed Rock Creek and Montanore mining sites - a wild ride to cap off a conference hosted by the Rock Creek Alliance and environmental organizations to bolster public opposition to the proposals.

In their continuing fight against the mines, the groups have used the federal Endangered Species Act as their weapon and the threatened grizzly bear as ammunition.

According to scientists with the environmental groups, in order to assure long-term survival of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states, bear habitats must be connected by land with little development and low road densities. They fear development would separate bear populations into islands, stymieing genetic diversity and cutting off potential food sources.

"This region is the lynch pin between connecting the Yellowstone grizzly bears to Canada," said Tim Preso, staff council with Earth Justice. "The Cabinet-Yaak is a dwindling and tiny grizzly bear population. We're struggling to keep its pulse. It's on life support."

For Sandpoint business leaders, worries focus on water purity of their beloved lake. The Sandpoint City Council sided with opposition in a series of resolutions against the mine, dating back to July 19, 1993.

"We believe that the risks are simply too great to our community. The mine would discharge up to 3 million gallons of wastewater daily into the Clark Fork River, which is the main source of water for the lake," Sandpoint Mayor Raymond P. Miller wrote in a letter dated April 26, 2004. "The pollution of heavy metals and nutrients would eventually end up in Pend Oreille. It will be a travesty if this lake becomes polluted because of this proposed mine."

The night Gordon and a group of reporters arrived in Sandpoint, the city's business leaders hosted a reception - an anti-mining pep rally of sorts - at Coldwater Creek, a local retailer located in a large log building overlooking rising fish in Lake Pend Oreille.

"When you talk to people around the community, they have a strong attachment to the lake, particularly that it's still a pristine body of water," said Dave Gunter, a Coldwater Creek representative. "There's just too much at stake. You could not ask for a worse physical location for a mine of any size."

Jim Watkins, owner of Tomlinson Black Real Estate, is an avid fisherman of Pend Oreille.

In recent years, Watkins said lakefront property in Sandpoint has more than doubled in value. But when he goes to sell it, too often he has to field questions about the mine. People ask him if there are any threats to Pend Oreille's water quality. He believes he's legally obligated to disclose information about the mine.

Sometimes, Watkins said, it's a deal breaker.

The bears

The image on the projector screen was blurry. It showed a female grizzly bear in the Rock Creek drainage, site of the proposed Rock Creek Mine.

Bears are hard to come by in the Cabinet Yaak National Forest ecosystem, but they could be the key to protecting it, explained Tim Preso, an attorney with the environmental group Earth Justice.

"This is kind of like that photo of Bigfoot. It's that rare," Preso said of the sighting.

The grizzly's habitat in the Cabinet Yaak encompasses 2,600 square miles in Northern Idaho, Montana and Canada.

According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates, it's home to between 30 and 40 bears.

"Those numbers have been about stable. They haven't changed very much over time," said Chris Servheen, the service's grizzly bear recovery coordinator.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has predicted without changes in management, the Cabinet Yaak grizzly population has a poor probability of survival, Servheen said. Fortunately for the grizzly bear, Servheen said, those changes are now being implemented.

The crux of the management changes involves educating the public about grizzly bears to reduce human-caused bear mortality, Servheen said. Fish and Wildlife Service also plans to build fences around trash bins, which would be made bear resistant.

Fish and Wildlife Service plans to eventually import bears into the Cabinets.

"We'll put in one to two bears per year on a regular basis. That's some of the best bear habitat in Montana," Servheen said.

Throughout its history, multiple companies have advanced the Rock Creek Mine, which is currently a project of a small Washington business, Revett Minerals.

The Rock Creek Mine debate started in 1990, with a proposed operation that would employ 340 people working on-site 24 hours a day for up to 35 years.

The U.S. Forest Service granted a permit for the 10,000-ton-per-day copper and silver mine at the doorstep of the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a biological opinion affirming the mine would pose no jeopardy to the grizzly bear population. According to the biological opinion, the mine would cause one grizzly mortality every 35 years and "should not lead to imminent population decline."

Earth Justice challenged the biological opinion in court.

"The population is already in decline without the mine. One plus one does not equal two in this equation," Preso said, adding estimates show the population is declining by 6.5 percent annually.

On March 28, a U.S. District Court ruled with the environmentalists that there was insufficient evidence to support the biological opinion, stating, "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must demonstrate a rational explanation for its conclusions."

The Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to release a revised biological opinion sometime in October. Regardless of how the judge rules on the document's latest version, both sides are prepared to appeal an unfavorable ruling to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

"For the moment, the mine has taken a heavy blow, and we're doing our part to make sure it doesn't recover," Preso said.

Brian Peck, of the Great Bear Foundation in Missoula, Mont., studies how the number of grizzly bears in a given ecosystem and the size and shape of the habitat impact a population's chances of survival.

The worst possible habitat shape for grizzly bears, according to Peck, is long and narrow, like the shape of the Cabinet Yaak population.

Additionally, the environmentalists argue the Cabinet and the Yaak populations have been rendered islands - also ominous for bear survival - because grizzly bears aren't crossing U.S. Highway 2, which runs between them.

Servheen, too, is troubled that grizzly bears aren't crossing the highway. A goal of Fish and Wildlife is to link bear populations, although Servheen notes it's impossible to force bears to roam into new habitat.

"Thirteen state and federal agencies have signed a memorandum of understanding to try to implement linkage," Servheen said. "Whether animals like grizzly bears will move, I don't know."

The Fish and Wildlife Service is currently studying where black bears cross Highway 2, hoping to use those same routes for grizzlies.

Servheen said Fish and Wildlife Service is working with private landowners to create highway access routes and continues to study what factors may be limiting grizzly movement there.

The Rock Creek Mine

Brian Peck's sport utility vehicle rattled up a steep logging road that wound through an old-growth forest, where moist air from the Pacific Ocean spurred the growth of hulking western cedars and western hemlocks.

As Peck drove higher, the ruts grew deeper and potholes and jagged rocks covered the eroded dirt road.

En-route to the Chicago Peak trailhead, Peck's passenger, Cezar Hernandez, northwest regional representative for the Montana Wilderness Association, pointed out locations where two proposed Rock Creek Mine facilities would be built. The first would be a 380-acre pile of pulverized rock left over from mining called a tailings impoundment. The other would be the millings facility, where two long tunnels would lead 1,000 feet underground from what is now a fork in a primitive road.

The environmentalists planned the excursion to highlight the raw beauty of an area they say would be spoiled by the Rock Creek Mine. If you ask officials from Revett Minerals, however, the mine would do little to sully the scenic area.

Where the logging road ended in a cul de sac, Peck and a caravan of cars following him pulled over to hike a steep path through thick trees into the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness. The trail emerged on a ledge overlooking a cirque of green mountains and Rock Creek - a stronghold for threatened bull trout that runs through a valley toward the Clark Fork River.

Another a mile or so into the hike, a cliff overlooked Copper Lake, a small, brown-colored body of water in a bowl. To the left, Chicago Peak rose like the ruins of an old castle.

A quarter mile further, a mountain goat was a lone sentinel atop a rock face high above Cliff Lake, an emerald and tree-lined body of water at the brink of a precipice.

Jonathan Langer, of the Natural Resources Defense Council, picked up a heavy rock with fluorescent blue coloration.

The rock's blue veins, Langer explained, were copper deposits, and the reason for the showdown about the future of the wilderness area.

Doug Ward, vice president of corporate development for Revett Minerals, also loves to hike in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness, where he boasts he saw two grizzly bears this spring.

And the Chicago Peak hike is among his favorites. He's confident that hike won't be any less beautiful once the mine is built. He's also sure that, eventually, there will be a Rock Creek Mine.

"We wouldn't be here if it wasn't going to happen," Ward said. "If we were going to start today, we would still have four to five years to actually get it going."

Once the mine goes in, Ward believes conditions will actually improve for grizzly bears and wildlife.

Revett Minerals has agreed to foot \$20 million for environmental mitigation costs.

The Rock Creek Mine would physically disturb 482 acres, Ward said. With the mitigation money, he said Revett would purchase 2,450 acres within the grizzly corridor to be deeded back to the government or placed in a conservation easement.

The mining process would not harm water quality, and employees would be bused in to limit impacts on bears, Ward said.

The mine would use the room-and-pillar method to extract rock - rock columns would be left underground to support the weight of surface layers and limit subsidence. Extracted rock would be pulverized to a flour consistency and added to water, where biodegradable reagents and air would make mineral specks float to the top for removal.

The byproduct, 90 percent silica sand, could be sold for making glass or returned to the mine to help support surface layers, and enable Revett to leave thinner columns.

But as submitted, Revett's plans call for storing the tailings all in a surface pile.

"There's no cyanide involved in the process. What's left is just sand. The Rock Creek Mine will have two levels of water treatment that will meet or exceed both Idaho and Montana water quality standards," Ward said. "There's a good scare tactic the opposition groups like. They refer to our water as wastewater. It's not that at all."

To counter what Ward considers to be misinformation about the Rock Creek Mine, Revett plans to launch a public relations campaign and open a small information office at the heart of the lion's den - Sandpoint. It would likely be Ward's job to man the Sandpoint office.

"It's going to be some rough duty. At the same time, it's worth talking to people," Ward said. "A lot of the perception is that Idaho gets all of the problems and none of the benefits. The problems had not been characterized properly, and we had been remiss in countering that."

When members of the Idaho Legislature's Environmental Common Sense Committee were considering a resolution opposing the Rock Creek Mine, Revett invited them for a Sept. 14 tour. In addition to the proposed Rock Creek site, the dozen lawmakers saw Revett's only active mine in Troy, Libby's neighboring community in Lincoln County, Mont.

Ward points to the Troy Mine - built in 1980, closed in 1993 and reopened in December with 150 workers - as a success story. Environmentalists such as Hernandez beg to differ.

Hernandez blames the Troy Mine for contaminating nearby Lake Creek and spoiling a blue-ribbon fishery.

Libby's perspective

In the eyes of many in Libby, Brian Peck is one of the enemies - one of the "enviros," as they're called in Lincoln County, Mont.

He's one of the people who rendered their high school's mascot, the Libby Logger, a relic from better times. Logging, once a major staple in Libby's economy, all but disappeared after the city's largest sawmill, Stimson, announced it was closing in October 2002.

And Peck and the other "enviros" have succeeded in delaying the Montanore Mine, which many residents believe would have otherwise brought back jobs to Libby already - jobs with the type of wages workers once drew from the sawmills and the W.R. Grace mine.

Libby sprawls four miles along U.S. Highway 2. As he drove through Libby, Peck passed the Two-bit RV Park, the Libby Pawn Shop, the Kootenai Forest Service Office, Lucky Lil's Casino, Maggies Casino and the Lucky Logger Casino. A street sign informed him he was 89 miles from Kalispell, Mont.

Libby does have its share of upscale homes, but they're mostly hidden in the trees.

The city is now a Superfund site, and some of its best jobs are provided by the Environmental Protection Agency's asbestos clean-up, which has cost hundreds of millions of dollars so far and is scheduled for completion in about five years.

Peck shook his head as he recounted what he considers to be a bitter irony.

"Now that we've poisoned their air, we'll poison their water," Peck said. "If I were the Libby Chamber of Commerce, I'd really be pushing the environment (and tourism) once they get Libby cleaned up."

The air poisoning, Peck explained, came from the vermiculite mine, which opened in 1924 and was operated by W.R. Grace from 1963 to 1990. Vermiculite was a product with a plethora of uses, including in landscaping projects throughout Libby. Among locals, the mine was known as "Zonolite" after the brand name of the insulation it made.

But the vermiculite also contained asbestos fibers. An estimated 1,500 people in the Libby area, which includes about 12,000 people, have reported asbestos-caused lung ailments. At least 200 have died from asbestosis.

The water poisoning, Peck said, will come if the Montanore Mine is built. The mine will likely be delayed for years, but Libby residents are confident that eventually, it will open, bringing with it 340 high-paying jobs.

In the meantime, Doug Ward, with Revett Minerals, believes the Rock Creek Mine will open and give Libby a boost. Revett expects a third of the Rock Creek Mine's workforce will come from Lincoln and Sanders counties in Montana and nearby Bonner County in Idaho.

"The people of Libby and Troy worked at Troy Mine for a long time and understand (Rock Creek will be) a completely different operation with completely different procedures than at the vermiculite mine," Ward said.

Mike Noble, the former W.R. Grace mine electrician, also considers comparing the Montanore proposal with "Zonolite" to be apples and oranges. He doesn't believe the mine would pose any ecological problems, and he believes people who would like to see Libby's economy turn around should tell their lawmakers they support it.

"How can a nation survive without working on its natural resources? That mining is there, and we do have the technology to take and make it safe," Noble said. "We're all environmentalists because we don't want our water ruined, but I think the minority is running the country now because they get up and scream, and the majority lets them do it."

LeRoy Thom, 50, worked at the W.R. Grace mine for 17 years. Thom currently operates an industrial welding and machine shop, and he said the Montanore Mine would mean business to him.

He, too, suffers from asbestosis. Thom has watched about 60 of his friends die from asbestosis, and one of his relatives who worked at the W.R. Grace mine has such damage to his lungs, it takes all of the energy he can muster to walk to his car.

"My (afflicted) lung functions," Thom said. "It's a very strange disease. Some people worked side by side with me. They worked there for three or four years and have full blown asbestosis disease."

He's currently vice chairman of a Libby group that uses EPA grant money to teach the public about the technical aspects of their city's ongoing clean-up.

But Thom believes times are different, and the Montanore Mine would be a welcome addition to the region. He, too, was on the spring bus trip to lobby the Montana governor in favor of the mine.

"The people involved in the state DEQ are so much more aware of impacts of bad situations. They're going to be more involved in watching and making sure things are done right," Thom said. "I think a lot of these companies realize they can't do what they used to do."

On an outside wall of Ardell Filler's business, Libby Sports, a sign hangs: "I love Libby." He opened his business as a milk distributor in 1962 and got into sporting goods five years later.

Filler believes the health repercussions of the "Zonolite" mine were blown "way out of proportion."

"I have it in my lungs. That doesn't mean I'm going to lay down and die," Filler said. "I still love Libby. It's still the best place to live and play."

From his shop, he can see the Cabinet Mountains. He believes the mountains are home to more grizzly bears than the region can stand, and he blames environmentalists for interfering with Libby's economic progress.

"I don't care for the people. I don't care for what they're doing," Filler said. "The thing they don't understand is when I go back in the woods, I look at what's growing back, not what they cut. It always grows back."

This summer, a road construction project provided jobs in Libby. But it's a far cry from the logging and mining jobs of the past.

"The mine over there in Troy has been fabulous for all those years," Filler said. "Now the technology is better than ever."

In conversations with his electorate, Montana Rep. Ralph Heinert has heard few, if any, comments voiced against the Montanore Mine.

He believes there's no chance the mine would lead to contamination, but it would provide a major employer in Lincoln County, which typically has Montana's third or fourth highest unemployment rate now that logging and mining have dwindled.

"Libby has been losing employment for one reason or another on an annual basis. In my mind, the environmental radicals, they protest and appeal every logging project we have no matter how big. As a result, the last of our mills shut down in late July," Heinert said. "It's really so different than what was involved with the vermiculite mine and the asbestos contamination that existed. The resilience of the people here - they understand that just because you have a problem with one type of resource use doesn't mean every resource is going to create a problem."

Libby Mayor Tony Berget grew up in Libby but spent some time living in Pocatello. Back when Berget called the Gate City home, people were selling T-shirts: "Last one to leave Pocatello turn off the lights."

He said losses in jobs in Libby have crippled his city's schools, and Libby now faces the same turning point as Pocatello did back in 1990.

"This community has always had a can-do attitude," Berget said. "They've rolled up their sleeves and said, 'This is our home. This is our town. We're going to do things about making things better.'"

In 2000 and 2001, Berget said the Libby housing market crashed based on fears about environmental contamination. The housing market is slowly returning to normal, he said.

"The whole state of Montana has been built on mines and logging. (The Mantanore Mine) would definitely provide a lot of jobs for individuals here," Berget said, adding Libby started as a gold-mining town. "Everything around you is either grown or mined. If it's not done here, it's going to be done somewhere else, and it may not be done to a standard that protects our environment. I care about my fishing holes. I care about the world around me, and I don't want to live in a dump.

"We don't mine the way we did in 1920. Sometimes, it takes a mistake to find out how we can do it the right way."