

Panel gives mine tentative thumbs-down

By KEITH KINNAIRD
News editor
January 27, 2006
Bonner County Daily Bee

SANDPOINT -- Idaho's Lakes Commission is giving the proposed Rock Creek Mine in northwestern Montana a tentative thumbs-down.

The commission voted Wednesday not to endorse the controversial mining project because of continuing concern over potential impacts to water quality in Idaho and lingering questions over the effectiveness of wastewater treatment at the mine.

"The commission cannot support the mine at this time. I don't think it's appropriate for us to say 'never,' but at this time we just don't have enough evidence," said Ford Elsaesser, chairman of the commission which advises Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne and the Legislature on water issues in the Pend Oreille and Priest basins.

Although the commission voted against the mine, some project critics in the audience were clearly hoping for a recommendation with a sharper edge to it. Several people encouraged commissioners to take a stronger stand against the mine, which would discharge treated wastewater into the Clark Fork River upstream from Lake Pend Oreille.

"Give 'em a bottom line: We don't want water being pumped into the Clark Fork River that's going to pollute the lake," said Bonner County resident Jean Gerth.

Commissioner Linda Mitchell came the closest to fully rebuking the project.

"There's just too many questions that have not been answered, too many risks involved and that, as presently proposed, it would be a danger to Lake Pend Oreille and other waterways. It's not in our best interest to be for this project as currently proposed," she said.

Other commissioners were less stringent in their remarks.

Commissioners Marc Brinkmeyer and Brent Baker both indicated they were not opposed to the practice of mining, but said the information that is out there has yet to answer their questions over water quality impacts. Both also suggested having the Tri-State Water Quality Council review technical aspects of the proposal.

Baker further suggested Revett Minerals consider partnering with Mines Management Inc., which is developing an adjacent mine called Montanore. Bakers said such a partnership would lessen environmental impacts, particularly as they relate to the river and the lake.

"It makes a lot of sense to encourage these mining companies to get together and do a joint impact statement and a joint venture to access the mine from the other side," said Baker.

Elsaesser agreed, saying such a move could better protect water quality and prove to be a more economical way to extract the ore. Elsaesser also questioned whether Revett Minerals was using the best water treatment system available or merely the most adequate.

Revett's vice president of operations, Carson Rife, expressed disappointment over the commission's recommendation. He said there was ample technical information about the proposal and the project's environmental impact statement requires the implementation of best management practices.

"The company stands on the 16 years of study that have gone into the review of the scientific data," he said after the vote. Rife added that the data were sound enough to win the U.S. Forest Service's approval.

After the meeting, the Rock Creek Alliance, a Sandpoint-based group which has been vigorously fighting the proposal, cautioned that combining the two mining proposals is by no means a solution because it would shift the environmental burden to another community. Moreover, wastewater from a combined project would likely wind up in Idaho via the Kootenai River, said Mary Mitchell the group's executive director.

Mitchell doubts additional study of the Rock Creek proposal will yield anything new.

"The studies have already shown we're going to have pollution of Lake Pend Oreille and I don't see why we need more studies," she said. "Our officials and governing bodies just need to take a stronger stance -- we're talking about perpetual pollution."