

Copper mine draft EA draws thousands of comments

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Thousands of people have weighed in on a draft plan for further exploration for a copper mine northeast of White Sulphur Springs, near a tributary to the Smith River.

Those who live and work in the community east of the Big Belt Mountains overwhelmingly wrote in support of the ongoing exploration effort by Tintina Alaska Exploration Inc. on the Black Butte Copper Project. They tout the positive economic impacts and the responsive nature of Tintina employees who have been taking core samples at the site for the past few years. So far, Tintina has spent about \$18 million in exploration costs.

Based on their core samples, Tintina forecasts that what it calls the “Johnny Lee deposit” could produce a single copper concentrate containing an average of 47 million pounds of payable copper metal per year during a 14-year mine life. That translates to 658 million pounds of copper, which at \$3 per pound, would have a value of \$1.97 billion.

“The creation of the mine would be a significant step in helping Meagher County become a more sustainable place to work, create business and help struggling businesses,” wrote Dallas Rasmussen, vice president of Dutton State Bank, which has an office in White Sulphur Springs. “Tintina Resources has shown that it wants to be an active member of the community by supporting many of the local organizations. Active participation in the repair of the local library and financial support for the local events in the past has proven that Tintina is making a conscious effort to give back to the community.”

However, others – including the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Trout Unlimited, the

Montana Environmental Information Center, the Upper Missouri Waterkeeper and numerous private parties – wrote that the Draft Environmental Assessment created to look into impacts of creating a long ramp to explore the underground holdings is incomplete and that the commenting process was unwieldy. They fear that the exploration work will drop water levels in Sheep Creek, which flows into the Smith River, and possibly send acid mine runoff into the popular fishery.

“The Draft EA for the proposed action is rife with data gaps and depends too heavily on still-to-be-specified details regarding water and waste rock chemistry, water treatment, soil characterization and operational commitments,” Bruce Farling, the executive director for Montana Trout Unlimited, wrote. “We believe the EA should be pulled back and that the agency must require additional information and perform more complete analysis while disclosing the results in a thorough Environmental Impact Statement. This EA is simply too inadequate to provide confidence to the public that the proposed action will not result in significant impacts.”

In addition, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks questions the assertion made by the state Department of Environmental Quality in the Draft EA that Tintina's proposed dewatering activities during exploration operations won't have a significant impact on Sheep Creek. The state agency also notes their studies have shown that 42 percent of tagged rainbow trout in the Smith River spawn in tributaries, with the Sheep Creek drainage accounting for 55 percent of that tributary spawning.

"Our most fundamental concern with the Draft EA relates to the removal of surface water and fishery resources from further study," FWP Director Jeff Hagener wrote. "... We believe the Final EA should be expanded to encompass these resource categories, including monitoring, standards and mitigation that should be required in the Amended Exploration Permit."

The DEQ released the Draft EA in July and put it out for a 45-day comment period. In the draft, DEQ said staff had determined that Tintina will be able to mitigate any possible impacts from its ongoing exploration at the Black Butte Mine. That includes the possibility that about 20 to 30 percent of the rocks removed could generate acid runoff, which is created when sulfide materials in waste rock react with water and oxygen to produce sulfuric acid.

The Draft EA only looks at Tintina's application for a permit for a "decline," which will let it get a better look at whether it's economically feasible to mine for copper there. Basically, the decline is a 5,200-foot-long ramp that goes underground. It will be 18-feet high and 18-feet wide on about 12,000 acres of public and private lands along Highway 89.

Tintina would be allowed to pull out 10,000 tons of rock for bulk sampling for metallurgical testing if the permit is issued.

In the 60-page draft document, Tintina proposes putting the underground materials it hauls out of the decline into two piles lined with a thick, non-permeable barrier. The "PAG" pile is of Potential Acid Generating materials, and is estimated to include about 30 percent of the rock. The remaining materials go into the "NAG" pile, which is the Non-Acid Generating rock.

Water that falls on the rocks will be collected and treated if necessary. The PAG pond would have the capacity to store 1.9 million gallons of water, while the NAG pond would have a 4.1 million gallon capacity.

If Tintina decides that it's not feasible to develop the copper mine, the company will put the PAG rocks back into the decline, cover it with a concrete barrier, then put the other rocks on top of that and reclaim the site. McCullough said that burying the PAG will halt the creation of acid runoff.

About 4,500 people submitted comments on the mine, noted Lisa Peterson, a DEQ spokesperson.

"That's a lot of comments for a Draft EA," she said. "A lot are form letters but even so we have to go through them individually. I know for our staff right now one of their top priorities is getting through all the comments, analyzing them and looking at issues that may need more consideration."

She theorized that the interest could come from the state dealing with previous

pollution from historic copper mining operations, like the Berkeley Pit in Butte, or because the Black Butte Copper Project is proposed near a tributary to the Smith River.

“Obviously this is a project with high public interest, and we are treating it that way,” Peterson said.

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