

FWP: DEQ should analyze mine's effect on water

AUGUST 29, 2013 1:12 PM

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has asked state environmental regulators to further study the effects that copper exploration would have on two key waterways before granting a Canadian company permission to dig a mile-long tunnel.

The comment from FWP was among more than 4,400 responses the Department of Environmental Quality received after issuing a draft environmental assessment that gave preliminary approval to the central Montana exploration project proposed by Tintina Alaska Exploration, the Great Falls Tribune (<http://gftrib.com/1a2Fhn9>) reported Wednesday.

The Black Butte Copper Project is near Sheep Creek, a tributary to the Smith River about 17 miles north of the White Sulphur Springs area.

Tintina wants to dig a mile-long tunnel and collect a 10,000-ton ore sample for metallurgical testing.

The company has said if the area shows promise it might seek to develop a \$210 million mine.

Environmental and angling groups have asked DEQ to further study the proposed exploration, while the White Sulphur Springs City Council said it supported the mine and its potential to improve the tax base. The deadline to comment was Tuesday.

FWP Director Jeff Hagener asked that any permit require the exploration to reduce and mitigate impacts to fish, wildlife and recreational resources.

DEQ had removed the categories of surface water and fishery resources from further study in the environmental analysis after concluding there would be no significant impact to Sheep Creek from dewatering.

However, Hagener said, surface and groundwater are the same thing in that area.

"Potential negative impacts to groundwater quantity and quality would be ultimately expressed in surface water, necessitating the further study and mitigation of impacts to surface water and related resources," FWP wrote.

The agency noted that Sheep Creek is a key spawning area for Smith River trout, while the agency has documented that rainbow trout from the Missouri River have traveled to spawn in the Sheep Creek drainage. It also argued that water in Sheep Creek is vital for maintaining the quality recreation experience of floating the Smith River.

Herb Rolfes, the DEQ's Operating Permit Section supervisor, said it could take the agency a couple of weeks to analyze all the comments and the final

environmental analysis would likely be completed in a month or two.

The DEQ would require Tintina to place any acidic rock in lined ponds.

Information from: Great Falls Tribune, <http://www.greatfallstribune.com>