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Federal agencies issue new plan for exploratory mining

By Philip L. Watness
The Pioneer

A proposal to do exploratory drilling northeast of Mount St. Helens is back on the front burner after nearly two years of review by the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service.

Canadian firm Ascot Resources Ltd. (doing business in the United States as Ascot USA Inc.) has proposed drilling 63 test holes from 23 pads to determine the extent of deposits of gold, molybdenum and copper.

The BLM on Monday, Aug. 7 published a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and the forest service concurred with that finding on Thursday, Aug. 24. The

permit required approval by the forest service because half of the 900 acres are in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

Environmental groups opposed to the proposal were quick to criticize the draft decision. Matt Little, executive director for the Cascade Forest Conservancy (previously called the Gifford Pinchot Task Force) issued a news release expressing the organization's opposition to the permit.

"Tens of thousands of people have expressed opposition to this proposal due to its impacts on clean water, native fish, and recreation in and around our most treasured national monument. Yet the agencies continue to advance this dangerous proposal," Little

wrote. "Allowing mining activities in a pristine river valley alongside an active volcano is simply ludicrous. We will do all we can to stop it."

The CFC has fought the proposal since Ascot first applied for the permit on March 1, 2011. The environmental group sued the BLM and the forest service after the agencies issued the initial FONSI on Nov. 30, 2012. The CFC was successful in forcing the BLM to review the decision and modify the environmental assessment twice in the ensuing five years.

BLM went back to the drawing table after U.S. District Court Judge Marco A. Hernandez in Portland ruled on July 3, 2014, that the agency had failed to do proper en-

vironmental analysis for the project. Rather than fight the decision, Ascot and BLM mutually agreed in early 2015 to drop their appeal of Hernandez's decision and redo the environmental document.

The federal district court judge ruled that the 2012 document failed to address whether the exploratory drilling was consistent with the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and Resource Management Plan, didn't include information about potential impacts on groundwater resources, and didn't identify critical habitat for Northern spotted owls.

BLM issued the modified assessment on Dec. 17, 2015, and kicked off another round of public comments. The latest version attempts to address

any new concerns raised in early 2016.

Ascot has sought since 2010 to conduct the exploratory drilling to determine the existence of copper, gold, and molybdenum in the "Margaret Deposit." The company drilled 11 of the 14 proposed drill holes before work was stopped after CFC threatened a lawsuit.

Ascot spokesman Michael McDonald said the objections by CFC and others have been addressed in the modified environmental assessment.

"The USFS and BLM went above and beyond what was required to address the issues that arose in the (2012) court decision," he said. "The court never ruled against our
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Read about how property taxes will rise to fund schools through local levy and state-mandated increases to pay for the McCleary ruling in the Sept. 6 edition of The Pioneer

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Wea

Submitted by Brian

Date	Precip
August 21	0.00
August 22	0.00
August 23	0.00
August 24	0.00
August 25	0.00

Exploratory mining...continued from p.1

project but only sought some additional review in the environmental analysis to study impacts to outdoor recreation, conduct a baseline ground water analysis, address effectiveness of mitigation measures, and address other reasonable alternatives."

McDonald said the permit process has "dragged on for a very long time."

"... it is a sad testament to how outside groups seek to drive up the cost of doing

business and push delays that not only hurt companies like ours, but, more importantly, hurt communities that are looking for economic opportunity," he said.

McDonald said the company hopes to begin conducting the test drills next spring because the 45-day comment period will push the final decision too late into the fall and winter.

According to BLM, "Objections will be accepted only

from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after designated comment opportunities."

That means that groups like CFC cannot raise issues already covered in the environmental assessment or decided by the federal court.

While Little claimed in the CFC press release that

the project "will significantly harm wild steelhead populations in the Green River, destroy recreational opportunities in the area, and pollute the water supply of downstream communities," those are all issues the organization has previously raised and which the modified environmental assessment addresses.

The test drilling will determine whether the amount of ore on site is enough to offset the investment and production costs of mining the area. That would mean the ore deposit would need to be at least twice as large as the amount established in 1969 by former owners, The Duval Company.

However, the actual mining might be conducted by another mining firm.

"If we uncover a substantial deposit, then we partner or sell our entire stake to a major mining company who has the resources and expertise to de-

velop a mine plan, go through permitting and conduct the mine operation to safely extract the resources in an environmentally sensitive manner," McDonald said.

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