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PD land swap in Arizona comes under fire from several groups

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Phelps Dodge's land exchange with the Bureau of Land Management, to facilitate establishment of a copper mine near Safford, Ariz., is coming under fire from several groups.

The San Carlos Apache Tribe and the Western Mining Action Project (a coalition consisting of the Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity and others) have filed protests with the BLM, according to a story by Greg Jones in the Eastern Arizona Courier.

The land swap involves PD giving the BLM 3,867 acres the company owns in five Arizona counties. The property includes the Vavasci Marsh, riparian parcels in the Gila Box National Conservation Area, parts of Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, and land providing access to Dos Cabezas Mountains Wilderness.

In return, the government is to deed to the mining company 16,297 acres about eight miles north of Safford, on which the mine would be established.

The BLM wrote that the property exchange involves "lands of equal value." Federal law requires parity in such deals.

However, the Courier reported, the Western Mining Action Project called the swap a "lopsided exchange, with PD receiving mining support lands and mineralized lands that could help produce several billion dollars of copper ore."

The coalition and tribe alleged the property to be deeded to PD is undervalued, and that the land to be transferred to the BLM is overvalued.

The coalition wrote that the BLM land should be used for residential development, rather than giving it to the mining company.

A BLM appraiser countered that the land is too steep for development, and that its best use is as support for future mining operations, according to the newspaper.

The protesting groups also charged that springs and water holes in the area could fail because of mining operations.

The facility, to be called Dos Pobres San Juan, "will include an integrated copper-mining project using conventional open-pit mining and solution-extraction/electrowinning technologies," Pay Dirt, a mining industry publication, reported.

The plant is expected to open between 2007 and 2009, "in the best-case scenario," a PD spokesman told the Daily Press. Plans call for the operation to employ about 250 miners and 100 contract workers.