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County leaders support mining project, despite concerns environmental review was rushed

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COOLIDGE — As federal agencies have weighed in recently, several Pinal County leaders expressed their support for Resolution Copper's controversial mining project slated for Oak Flat, in the north-central portion of Pinal County. But while local business leaders believe the mining project would boost the local economy, the nonprofit Apache Stronghold filed an emergency appeal on Feb. 23, as opponents maintain the operation would devastate the local environment and an Apache religious site.

Monday afternoon, the U.S. Department of Agriculture pushed back the early-March date for a federal land swap in order to consult with Native American tribes and other concerned groups for further environmental review.

Gov. Doug Ducey blasted the delay Monday.

"I am extremely disappointed in the Administration's decision to cease progress on Arizona's Resolution Copper project, which is set to grow jobs and is estimated to create a direct and indirect economic impact of more than \$1 billion to Arizona's economy every year," Ducey said in a statement.

During a Coolidge Chamber of Commerce luncheon last week, newly elected Pinal County Supervisor Kevin Cavanaugh spoke and framed mining for copper in Oak Flat as a matter of economic freedom.

"We are at economic war right now," Cavanaugh said. "Our fighting forces are small businesses. I will work as hard as I can to bring economic activity to the people of Pinal County."

An environmental impact statement, originally scheduled for December of 2021, was produced by the U.S. Forest Service in mid-January; critics believe the document was fast-tracked by the outgoing Trump administration to circumvent more thorough analysis.

The decision initially created a 60-day time frame after which the federal government would be obligated to complete the land exchange that would award Resolution Copper the mining site. That timeline is once again in flux, though Apache Stronghold attorney Mike Nixon said that “Oak Flat is still on death row.”

Cavanaugh said that he had pressed the federal government to approve the mine as being in the long-term interest of the United States and that the copper would be mined “using the cleanest methods available” and that it would benefit the town of Superior, “putting a beautiful mining town back on the map.”

The following day, during a talk hosted by Pinal Partnership, Resolution Copper manager Hesston Klenk offered more details on the status of the project. According to Klenk, the mine would be the largest copper mine in North America and would eventually employ up to 3,700 people, most of them on site.

Environmentalists have disputed the company’s claims of economic necessity and many believe that the mine would ultimately be a net negative for the area in a variety of ways.

“Mining companies, and their supporters, want to talk about economic benefit in a vacuum,” said Center for Biological Diversity conservationist Randy Serraglio. “Environmental damages also have an economic impact. We have billions of dollars in contaminated sites that taxpayers are left to clean up.”

According to Serraglio, the biggest economic issue could be the mine’s impact on local water supplies. The 7,000-foot mine shaft would go through the area’s aquifer, and the displacement of water would not only affect wildlife in the area but could create water issues for planned developments east of Apache Junction.

“This mine would use more water than the city of Tempe every year,” Serraglio said. “Here in Arizona, where we have shortages coming on the Colorado River, it’s just a matter of when. Our water security is more questionable than it’s ever been.”

Cavanaugh did acknowledge that the mine would damage the area’s natural splendor. “There’s no sugarcoating the mine process,” Cavanaugh said. “It will produce land that will be unbeautified, but not in a brownfield sort of way. They are a clean operation.”

Nevertheless, Cavanaugh believed the land swap and environmental impact statement were sufficient.

Left out of economic discussion is the religious and cultural significance of the Oak Flat site for Native American tribes in the area. Serraglio compared the destruction of the land, which would create a mile-deep hole in the ground, to “blowing up Mount Sinai.”

Despite the company’s claim that the Oak Flat mine could provide 25% of the country’s copper annually, Serraglio suggested there was no copper shortage in the nation and that there were even available mining jobs in Arizona.

“No mines in Arizona are operating near full capacity, it’s not a matter of jobs not existing,” Serraglio said. “Just because there’s copper doesn’t mean you have to dig it up out of the ground.”