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Trump to approve land swap for Rio Tinto's Resolution Copper project

By Ernest Scheyder

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(Reuters) - U.S. President Donald Trump's outgoing administration plans to approve a controversial land swap needed for Rio Tinto Ltd and partners to build an Arizona copper mining project that Native American tribes say will destroy sites of cultural and religious value.



Reuters/NANCY WIECHEC FILE PHOTO: FILE PHOTO: View of Resolution Copper Mining's east plant near Superior, Arizona

The move further escalates the growing global clash between indigenous groups, who are increasingly vocal about the need to preserve historical lands, and mining companies eager to produce more copper for electric vehicles and other green technologies.

The U.S. Forest Service will publish a final environmental impact statement for the mine on Jan. 15, a necessary step to complete the land exchange, said Tom Torres, acting supervisor of the Tonto National Forest, where the mine would be built.

Publication will come five days before Trump is replaced by President-elect Joe Biden, who has not spoken publicly about the project but promised Arizona tribal leaders in October that they would "have a seat at the table" in his administration.

Rio Tinto said it is "is committed to ongoing engagement with the Forest Service" once Biden is president, as well as with "with tribes and the community to continue shaping the project and building programs that protect Native American cultural heritage and help diversify the local economy."

Officials from the San Carlos Apache Tribe and the Biden campaign could not immediately be reached for comment.

Publication of the final report is a technical requirement for the land swap, which dates back to 2014, when former President Barack Obama approved the process. The government must, within 90 days, swap the land above the copper reserve for acreage that Rio owns nearby.

Rio and partner BHP Group Ltd must still get construction permits for the mine, which the incoming Biden administration is likely to oppose or slow-walk, analysts say.

The tribe and their allies have vowed not to let the mine open and have already begun lobbying Biden to block construction permits. Some tribal members have said they will physically barricade themselves on the land to prevent the mine's construction.

(Reporting by Ernest Scheyder; Editing by Dan Grebler)