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USDA puts brakes on land transfer for Arizona copper mine

By FELICIA FONSECA an hour ago [March 1, 2021]

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — The Biden administration is pulling back an environmental review that cleared the way for a parcel of federal land that Apaches consider sacred to be turned over for a massive copper mining operation in eastern Arizona.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said Monday that it likely will take several months to further consult with Native American tribes and others about their concerns over Oak Flat and determine whether the environmental review fully complies with the law.

The agency cited President Joe Biden's recent memo on strengthening relationships with tribal nations, and regularly consulting with them in a meaningful way.

The USDA and the U.S. Forest Service acknowledged they can only do so much. Congress mandated that the land be transferred to Resolution Copper no later than 60 days after the final environmental review was published. The document was released in the last days of Donald Trump's administration.

Michael Nixon, an attorney for the Apache Stronghold group that filed the first of the lawsuits, said the USDA's decision is welcome but doesn't have much impact.

"Oak Flat is still on death row," he said. "Essentially, they're just changing the execution date."

Dan Blondeau, a spokesman for Resolution Copper, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The parcel of land in the Tonto National Forest east of Phoenix was set to be transferred to Resolution Copper by mid-March. At least three pending lawsuits have raised concerns over religious freedom rights, land ownership and violations of federal law.

The land transfer was included as a last-minute provision in a must-pass defense bill in 2014 after it failed for years as stand-alone legislation. Resolution Copper would get 3.75 square miles (9.71 square kilometers) of national forest land in exchange for eight parcels it owns elsewhere in Arizona.

Apaches call Oak Flat "Chi'chil Bildagoteel." The land near Superior has ancient oak groves, traditional plants and living beings that tribal members say are essential to their religion and

culture. Those things exist elsewhere, but Apache Stronghold said they have unique power within Oak Flat.

San Carlos Apache Chairman Terry Rambler said Monday that the tribe will continue working to permanently protect Oak Flat.

Resolution Copper, a joint venture of global mining companies Rio Tinto and BHP, has spent millions of dollars prepping the area to mine copper, but actual mining isn't expected to start for at least 10 years.