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Rio Tinto's pledge on cultural heritage policies faces big test

US set to release study on huge Arizona copper project opposed by Native American tribes

Neil Hume, Natural Resources Editor 12 hours ago [January 5, 2021]

Rio Tinto's vow to improve its cultural heritage policies faces a test with the publication of a long-awaited report on the development of a huge underground copper mine in Arizona.

The US Forest Service will release a final environmental impact statement on the Resolution Copper project this month, ending an eight-year approval process.

It could pave the way for a controversial land swap agreement that Native American tribes say will lead to the destruction of sacred land at the proposed mine 60 miles east of Phoenix.

The FEIS comes as Rio tries to win back the trust of indigenous groups following the destruction in May of a 46,000-year-old sacred Aboriginal site in the heartland of its flagship Australian iron ore business.

The Anglo-Australian company has pledged to reassess any activities with a potential impact on heritage sites. New chief executive Jakob Stausholm, whose predecessor Jean-Sébastien Jacques was forced out over the Juukan Gorge blasts, has said repairing relations with traditional landowners will be a priority for the mining group.

The battle to develop Resolution also highlights rising tensions between traditional landowners and big miners that aim to increase production of copper, a metal that will be needed in greater quantities to wire the green economy.

The San Carlos Apache Tribe has accused Rio of trying to repeat the "atrocities" of Juukan Gorge at Resolution.

Resolution, which is 55 per cent owned by Rio with the rest held by rival BHP, has the potential to supply nearly 25 per cent of US copper demand for 40 years.

US commerce secretary Wilbur Ross said last year that the US had "special appreciation for global enterprises like Rio Tinto that choose to engage in projects like this one on our shores".

For the project to proceed, Rio requires control of more than 10 sq km of national forest, including a campground area called Oak Flat that is used by 11 tribes and where mining was previously prohibited. In return, Rio has acquired more than 22 sq km of land elsewhere in Arizona that it will give to the US government.

Roger Featherstone, of the Arizona Mining Reform Coalition, said losing Oak Flat would be a “tragedy beyond compare” and mark the first time the US government had given a sacred site to a foreign mining company.

“The Forest Service decision to rush the release of the FEIS on January 15 shows us just how flawed the Resolution Copper process has been and just how eager Rio Tinto and BHP have been to prioritise their project over the protection of our cultural and ecological heritage,” he said.

The USFS has previously denied fast-tracking the FEIS so the land exchange can begin before the end of Donald Trump’s presidency.

Once the FEIS is released, the public has 45 days to object to the draft decision on the mine plan, and the USFS must respond and address any concerns within 90 days.

Rio said it was committed to engagement with the local community to protect Native American cultural heritage at Oak Flat and

Even if Rio receives final approval it will need dozens of additional permits from the incoming Biden administration. It will then have to decide if the project, which involves sinking shafts of up to 2km into the earth, is economically and socially feasible. A final investment decision is unlikely to be taken until 2025.

Rio and BHP have spent \$2bn to develop and gain permissions for Resolution, the development of which would take another decade.

“After the permitting process concludes, a detailed feasibility study will be completed over a period of years before any decision on investment to proceed with the project,” Rio said in a statement.