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Native Americans sue Trump administration over Rio Tinto's Arizona copper project

By Reuters Staff

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(Reuters) - Members of the San Carlos Apache tribe in Arizona on Tuesday said they have sued the Trump Administration to block a pending land swap that would give Rio Tinto the land it needs to build its Resolution Copper project.

Apache Stronghold, a non-profit organization that filed the lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Phoenix, said it sought to stop the publication of a final environmental impact statement that will trigger the transfer of Oak Flat land to Resolution Copper.

Oak Flat, or Chi'chil Bildagoteel, is central to the Apache tribe's traditional religion and identity. The land is located about 70 miles east of Phoenix in the Tonto National Forest.

"Giving away our sacred land by the U.S. Government for destruction by a foreign mining company destroys our ability to practice our religion," Apache Stronghold said in an emailed statement.

In a separate letter to the U.S Department of Agriculture obtained by Reuters, tribe chairman Terry Rambler said the department had failed to consider "substantial new information about cumulative impacts to groundwater resources," particularly at the proposed tailings dam site.

He requested the department hold off publication until all new information had been considered: "At stake are potentially disastrous environmental impacts," Rambler said.

Resolution Copper said it was reviewing the complaint.

"We remain committed to ongoing engagement with Native American Tribes to continue shaping the project and deliver initiatives that recognise and protect cultural heritage," it said in a statement.

It has said that it anticipates the Oak Flat campgrounds will be open for at least the next several decades, and possibly longer, if it decides to go ahead with the project.

Minority partner BHP Group had no immediate comment.

U.S. President Donald Trump's outgoing administration plans to approve the land swap on Jan. 15, clearing a long-time hurdle for a project that is opposed by many Native Americans.

The statement is slated to be published on Friday, five days before Trump is replaced by President-elect Joe Biden.

While Biden has not spoken publicly about the project, he promised Arizona tribal leaders in October that they would "have a seat at the table" in his administration.

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