

B.C. mine plan goes 'major'

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Project would require much more environmental review

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A Canadian mining firm has changed course and announced plans to pursue a "major" mine review rather than a "fast-track" project through the British Columbia provincial government, the Flathead Basin Commission learned Wednesday.

Kathy Eichenberger, regional manager for British Columbia's Ministry of Environment, told the commission that the Cline Mining Corp. was having initial discussions with provincial officials in Victoria this week to discuss the process for reviewing major mining projects.

She went on to describe the process outlined in the province's Environmental Assessment Act.

"We applaud it," said Steve Thompson, Glacier field representative for the National Parks Conservation Association. "This watershed is way too important to try and do a fast-track open-pit coal mine. And we commend the British Columbia government from making sure that Cline doesn't try to cut any corners."

Cline had announced plans to apply for a small-mine permit by the end of November for a coking coal mine in the Foisey Creek drainage, one of the northernmost tributaries to the North Fork Flathead River, which flows south to Flathead Lake. Forward-looking financial documents earlier declared that the company planned to obtain a small-mine permit, with coal production limited to 250,000 tons per year, and then pursue a major mining permit to ramp up production.

A small-mine permit involves environmental review requirements that fall well short of the major project requirements outlined by Eichenberger.

As a result of Cline's plans, mining in the Canadian Flathead has clearly gained a higher profile. Wednesday's meeting was attended by political and government leaders from Montana and British Columbia. There was a passel of scientists, along with tribal and county representatives and state and federal land and wildlife managers who sit on the commission.

The last time the Basin Commission discussed potential mining projects in the Canadian Flathead in the spring of 2004, there was nowhere near the turnout.

"I can see that this is a high-level meeting," said Dennis Schornack, the U.S. co-chairman of the International Joint Commission, perhaps the most notable person at the meeting.

The International Joint Commission is a six-person panel that is charged with preventing and resolving disputes between the U.S. and Canada under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909.

After seeing a series of presentations on the mining issue, Schornack said there is enough local scientific and political ability to resolve issues without the formal involvement of the IJC.

"The capacity is here - you can deal with these problems," said Schornack, who explained that the IJC is sort of a last-stop arbiter when it comes to boundary water disputes.

"When things get to that level, they're pretty bad, almost unresolvable," Schornack said.

Since 1999, he said, the IJC has attempted to put more of an emphasis on preventing disputes rather than resolving them after they've become highly contentious. And because of that, he said, the IJC is willing to provide assistance and financial resources to a transboundary effort to gather "baseline" data, an inventory of water and fisheries conditions in the basin.

"That's the first time the IJC has said they are willing to invest in this," said Thompson, who has followed the Canadian mining issue closely in recent years. "I thought that was real significant."

But Schornack warned that the mining issue could eventually lead to a formal referral to the IJC - a process that requires recommendations from Canada's minister of foreign affairs and the U.S. secretary of state.

The IJC relies heavily on scientific information, he said, and because of Cline's current position, he senses an urgency to expedite scientific field work.

The work that is needed is a trend view of the basin's natural resources rather than a snapshot, he said.

"Time is involved, and I'm a bit concerned here that time is starting to run out," he said.

Hal Harper, Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer's chief of staff, expressed optimism that there will be cooperation between British Columbia and Montana. He cited a recent meeting between Schweitzer and Premier Gordon Campbell as evidence of developing relations and said the two would be meeting again in the near future.

Every Montana governor since Ted Schwinden has urged British Columbia to develop a joint management strategy for the Canadian Flathead and the North Fork area south of the border. And Schweitzer is urging a joint effort to pursue a comprehensive baseline study before there is industrial development in the Canadian Flathead.

"We think the next phase is coming, and it's time to move," Harper said.

Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger reiterated those comments, saying that the North Fork Flathead has "become part of Montana's quality of life."

Jack Stanford, director of the University of Montana's Yellow Bay Biological Station, estimated that \$11 million is needed to carry out a comprehensive inventory of water, plant, wildlife and economic resources in the transboundary Flathead Basin. He said Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., is already working on finding congressional funding, but he predicted it would likely have to come from multiple sources.

Stanford stressed that the North Fork and the Canadian Flathead combine for one of the most intact ecosystems in the lower 48 states, and Glacier National Park and populated Flathead Valley has benefited economically. He predicted that coal mining in the Canadian Flathead would result in rippling environmental impacts.

Because coal deposits are close to the surface in the basin, Stanford said Cline's coal mining will literally involve "mountain removal."

"This is not conventional coal mining. It is mountaintop mining. Now that's a major change on the landscape," Stanford said, showing a picture of a terraced mountainside resulting from a similar mining operation in Canada.

Stanford said a comprehensive inventory of resources will allow for precise measurement of any impacts that result in the Canadian Flathead, and any impacts that develop downstream, all the way to Flathead Lake.

But gathering the information won't be simple, said Jack Potter, who heads Glacier National Park's science division. Much information has already been gathered, but it is scattered among different agencies, institutions and private entities. The National Park Service has committed \$100,000 in "seed money" to begin gathering information and filling in considerable "data gaps."

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