

Governor wants state representation on panel

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By JIM MANN

Gov. Brian Schweitzer is angling for Montana representation on a British Columbia panel that would establish environmental review conditions for a major mine in the Canadian Flathead.

At the same time, Schweitzer is pursuing an agreement that could delay the Cline Mining Corp. project until the province and the state jointly complete an inventory of ecological conditions north and south of the border in the North Fork Flathead basin.

In a letter sent to British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell last week, Schweitzer called for negotiations to finalize a Memorandum of Understanding regarding natural resource development in the transboundary Flathead. That agreement would implement an Environmental Cooperative Arrangement that was signed by Campbell and former Montana Gov. Judy Martz in 2003.

"A part of these discussions would include fashioning the framework for conducting a baseline assessment of the transboundary Flathead in Montana and British Columbia prior to any major resource developments on either side of the border," the letter states. "Montana and agencies of the U.S. government have indicated a willingness to help finance such an assessment consistent with the recent recommendations of a bi-national science workshop that focused on this area."

Cline Mining Corp. on Jan. 9 opened a "pre-application" process for an open pit coal mine in the Foisey Creek basin, a headwaters tributary that flows into the Canadian Flathead River, and south into Montana's North Fork Flathead River. Cline is proposing to remove 2 million tons of coking coal a year during an estimated span of 12 years. Coking coal is used in the production of steel, and Cline plans to ship its coal to Asian steel producers, some of which are investors in the mining project on Foisey Creek.

Schweitzer and other Montanans are interested in the pre-application process because it will establish the "terms of reference," or the standards and conditions that Cline must meet in preparing its own Environmental Assessment for the project. A "working group" establishes the terms of reference for that environmental review and British Columbia officials have said it is possible for Montana to have representation on that panel.

In his letter, Schweitzer said he "very much appreciate" the opportunity for Montana representatives to be included in the working group.

At the last Flathead Basin Commission meeting in Kalispell, the regional manager of BC's Ministry of Environment noted that there is a precedent, with Alaska state officials participating in similar provincial reviews for other projects.

Steve Thompson, Glacier field representative for the National Parks Conservation Association, said Montana's inclusion in the process would be significant, but the joint development of some form of "bi-national action plan" for managing the transboundary Flathead basin would be truly significant.

Thompson, state officials, and members of an organization called the Flathead Coalition are concerned not only about the Cline Mine and its impacts on fisheries, wildlife and water quality; they see potential for mining expansion in the Canadian Flathead.

Thompson asserts that some form of joint strategy for managing the basin would be helpful in heading off future transboundary disputes, with Montana seeking enforcement of the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909.

The past five Montana governors have endorsed the idea, and Schweitzer took it one step further in meeting with Premier Campbell in Victoria, B.C., last year. Schweitzer is pursuing future meetings with Campbell, specifically asking him to join him on a helicopter tour over the Flathead basin.

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