

DEQ seeks comments on proposed mine expansion

Golden Sunlight Extending life of mine would bring in \$1M to \$3M in state taxes



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Comments are being taken on a proposed 15th amendment to the 1975 operating permit for the Golden Sunlight Mine, which would allow for the expansion of one pit and the creation of a new one.

A draft Environmental Impact Statement issued recently by the state Department of Environmental Quality notes that without the expansion, the Whitehall-area gold mine will cease operations around 2015. The proposed new and expanded pits will allow it to continue mining and milling Golden Sunlight for two years beyond that.

During a scoping period during the summer, where more than 100 people offered advice on areas the draft EIS should consider, no one spoke in opposition to the plan, according to DEQ. Instead, many touted the positive socioeconomic impacts, including 200 people and 60 contractors employed at the mine. The mine operates around the clock every day of the week.

Extending the life of the mine would bring an additional

\$1 million to \$3 million in state taxes.

The main issue in the 155-page draft EIS involves alternatives surrounding what to do with the new proposed pit. Of particular concern is the waste rock generated through mining activities there. The rock includes pyrite — or fool's gold — which when exposed to air and water can create acid mine runoff. Currently, water from the existing mining operations is pumped and treated onsite.

In 2007, five environmental groups sued DEQ, trying to force Golden Sunlight to refill its massive open pit once the company ceases gold mine operations. But the DEQ director at the time, Richard Opper, eventually decided that would be more harmful to the environment than allowing the mine to continue to pump and treat the tainted water.

He noted that most of the waste rock piles at that time already were covered with soil and vegetation, which keeps water from reacting with the rocks to cause the acid mine drainage. It's also easier to reach the water in the pit to pump and treat it if it's not covered with soil, according to Opper.

Under the company's proposed alternative, Golden Sunlight would expand its current mining operation with a new North Area Pit and expand the existing Mineral Hill Pit, known as the South Area Layback. The expansion would allow the company to mine an additional 4.2 million tons of gold ore that would be processed at the existing mill facility.

Approximately 52.6 million tons of waste rock would be generated from the proposed new mining areas and would be placed in placed in the East Waste Rock Dump Complex.

DEQ is offering a modified version of that alternative, which includes adding the capture and routing of seeping ground and surface water to the treatment area.

Another option involves refilling the new North Area Pit with about 9 million tons of waste rock that will be generated by the expansion, instead of hauling it to the waste rock dump complex. While this would look more "normal" after it's revegetated, it could prevent the construction of a secondary groundwater capture system.

The Montana Environmental Information Center has been part of the litigation over whether backfilling previous pits is necessary. MEIC Executive Director Jim Jensen said he's pleased DEQ is finally including backfilling as an option in a draft EIS.

"That's a big step forward," Jensen said.

He added that on Friday, his group requested a 30-day extension of the current comment period in order to peruse the document more thoroughly before offering comments.

While the state typically comes out with a preferred alternative, it didn't do so with this proposal.

"We have not chosen a preferred alternative for this EIS, because they all have pros and cons. Comments from the public and the local community will be very important to making our decision," said current DEQ Director Tracy Stone-Manning.

Comments: In person, email, standard mail

DEQ will hold a public meeting to accept comments on the draft EIS from 6 to 8 p.m. on Oct. 8 at the Whitehall Community Center. DEQ staff will explain the draft EIS and take comments.

The department will accept written comments on the draft EIS until Oct. 20. They can be sent to Kristi Ponozzo, DEQ Director's Office, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, Mont., 59620 or by email to deqgoldensunlighteis@mt.gov.

The draft EIS is available on the DEQ website at www.deq.mt.gov