



New Rosemont flap centers on power-line capacity

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The question of whether it's possible to reduce the juice of a power line for the Rosemont Mine has come up in heated, dueling letters to the Forest Service from Pima County's administrator and Rosemont Copper's CEO.

Opponents of the proposed mine have made an issue out of the power line's size. It's not because a less powerful line would be less obtrusive, but because Rosemont Copper also has mineral rights in other areas of the Santa Rita Mountains. If it later tries to mine those as well, it would need new approvals for more power if a smaller line were built originally.

Rosemont has denied any plans to mine those other deposits - a denial its chief executive repeated in his latest letter, although the deposits have been shown in investor presentations.

The power line is one of many issues that County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry raised - and Rosemont CEO Rod Pace rebutted - in letters over whether the \$1.226 billion mine needs a new or supplemental draft environmental impact statement.

In a late October letter to the Forest Service, Huckelberry, a mine opponent, wrote that more review is needed because the project has changed substantially since the federal agency released its first draft a year ago.

That's due to Rosemont Copper's recent plans to cancel heap leaching to extract copper from copper oxide ore, and to boost production of copper sulfide.

These changes meet federal standards needed to justify more reviews, Huckelberry wrote. Under the National Environmental Policy Act, a restarted review is warranted if the project has substantial changes, or if significant new circumstances or information appear, he wrote.

Pace immediately fired back, saying in a letter to the Forest Service that the mine's changes aren't substantial, just a logical response to comments on the draft environmental report. In the past, Rosemont has said one reason it made the changes was because critics raised concerns about the use of sulfuric acid in leaching.

Pace called this "last-minute" Huckelberry letter "disingenuous ... an attempt by Pima County leadership to stop an important new business opportunity for our community, which will create badly needed jobs and result in significant direct and indirect benefits to Southern Arizona."

Underlying this dispute is timing. Coronado National Forest Supervisor Jim Upchurch has said that if he doesn't do a new draft environmental report, he can issue the final report and a decision in December on whether the mine can operate on forest land.

Another review would require a new document and more public comments, delaying a project that supporters say has been delayed too long but opponents say still needs more analysis.

The Arizona Corporation Commission voted earlier this year to approve a 13-mile, 138 KV Tucson Electric Power line from the Sahuarita area to the mine site in the Santa Ritas.

Huckelberry wrote that this line has enough excess capacity to serve four mines - so Rosemont could be served by a 69 KV line or a double-circuited, 46 KV line.

That's because in eliminating heap leaching and related activities, the company reduced its average power demand about 12 percent to below 100 megawatts from an original demand of more than 100 megawatts, he wrote.

TEP official Ed Beck told the ACC's power line siting committee a year ago that the 138 KV line could serve 400 to 500 megawatts, while a 69 KV line would be "marginal" for one mine.

Beyond that, TEP spokesman Joe Barrios said that while a 138 KV line has capacity to serve up to 500 megawatts, its entire system of substations and power transformers in that area can serve no more than 280 megawatts.

Also, even though Rosemont's average daily demand is now less than 100 megawatts, TEP needs a line that can serve Rosemont's total "connected load," or all the mine's equipment if used at once, Barrios said on Friday. That requires 126 megawatts - more than a double-circuit 46 or a single-circuit 69 can serve, Barrios said.

In other issues:

- Huckelberry wrote that the new Rosemont mine plans require removal of 80 million tons of rock more than analyzed in the 2011 environmental report. The pit appears larger on maps, and these two factors could cause substantial differences in how much depletion of the aquifer occurs, he said. It also could change the size and height of the tailings piles and the potential for rock failures, he wrote.

Pace replied that its changed operations will cause fewer impacts and that the mine's basic footprint is unchanged - and that the county's own maps show this. Eighty million tons is only 4 percent more than was studied in the 2011 environmental report - "not enough to result in substantially different impacts," Pace wrote.

- Deleting heap leaching, an associated solvent extraction plant and an underground drain system will trigger a significant amendment to the mine's already approved state aquifer protection permit, Huckelberry wrote. This means a substantial change in pollutant discharges, he said. Also, another environmental report should disclose the fate of oxide waste that won't be mined now, he wrote.

"We now know that oxides will be segregated from the processed rock, but where and for how long, and what will be the effects on the environment?" he asked.

Pace replied that impacts of the oxide waste rock already have been thoroughly studied, in geochemical research done as part of the draft environmental report. Those studies counted the oxide ore as waste rock "and therefore addressed any concerns," he said.

He added that the oxide processing has been eliminated partly in response to the Forest Service's preference of one of five alternative mine layouts, which reduces available operating

space.

- Huckelberry pointed out that the Forest Service and its consultants are now redrawing boundaries for a proposed Traditional Cultural Property designation for the Santa Ritas, a designation aimed at dealing with tribal concerns about the uses of these lands they consider sacred. These modifications represent a significant agency action and new information that merit more environmental review, the county administrator wrote.

Pace countered that these changes don't require more studies - "even with all the changes, all relevant studies have been conducted," he said.

Huckelberry's letter is "disingenuous ... an attempt by Pima County leadership to stop an important new business opportunity for our community, which will create badly needed jobs and result in significant benefits to Southern Arizona."

Rod Pace, Rosemont CEO

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