

County, city: 'No' to mining

Written by [Aaron West, The TriPLICATE](#) July 10, 2014 03:11 pm

Local officials respond to public outcry with letters opposing exploratory drilling



Local residents show their opposition to a mining proposal in the Smith River watershed during last week's Fourth of July parade. Del Norte TriPLICATE / Bryant Anderson

The people of Del Norte and their representatives have spoken and the resounding consensus is a firm "no" to drilling in the watershed of the North Fork Smith River.

In an uncommon alignment of solid public support and unanimous board agreement this week, a unified local voice was forged in opposition to Red Flat Nickel Corporation's proposed exploratory drilling operation planned for the immediate vicinity of the North Fork Smith, a principal tributary of the Smith River located in southwestern Oregon.

Both the Crescent City Council and the Board of Supervisors, encouraged by community members who spoke passionately during both board meetings' public hearings, voted to send letters of opposition to the Oregon Water Resources Department asking the permitting agency to deny Red Flat Nickel Corp.'s application to use water for drilling.

"I think we ought to take the example the city's set already and send a pretty strong letter saying we're opposed to this," Supervisor Mike Sullivan said during the Board's meeting. "There hasn't been public input into the process, and they haven't done enough due diligence on it, quite frankly."

Both boards ultimately sent letters, which were due by 5 p.m. on Tuesday, that decried the OWRD's pending approval of water use for drilling, especially in light of the fact

that the Forest Service's environmental review hasn't been completed and has been put on hold until fall, after the fieldwork research season ends.

"It's creating a lot of public controversy and questions, and we just don't have the staff to do it at this time," said Holly Witt, environmental coordinator for Rogue-Siskiyou National Forest, the land management agency that is conducting environmental review for the Cleopatra Check Drilling Program.

"The lack of information and inadequate analysis of the potential impacts of the project significantly concerns the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors," the county's letter reads. "In addition, Del Norte County residents have expressed their concerns to both the Board of Supervisors and Crescent City Council at separate public meetings and it is obvious this application is not in the public interest."

The letters were addressed not only to the Water Resources Department but also the governors and U.S. senators of California and Oregon, U.S. representatives Jared Huffman and Peter Defazio and other relevant agencies.

Oregon senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and Rep. DeFazio have formally asked the Obama administration to withdraw the area encompassing the Cleopatra site.

Strong public opposition

At the meetings, the public's resistance to the proposal was clear.

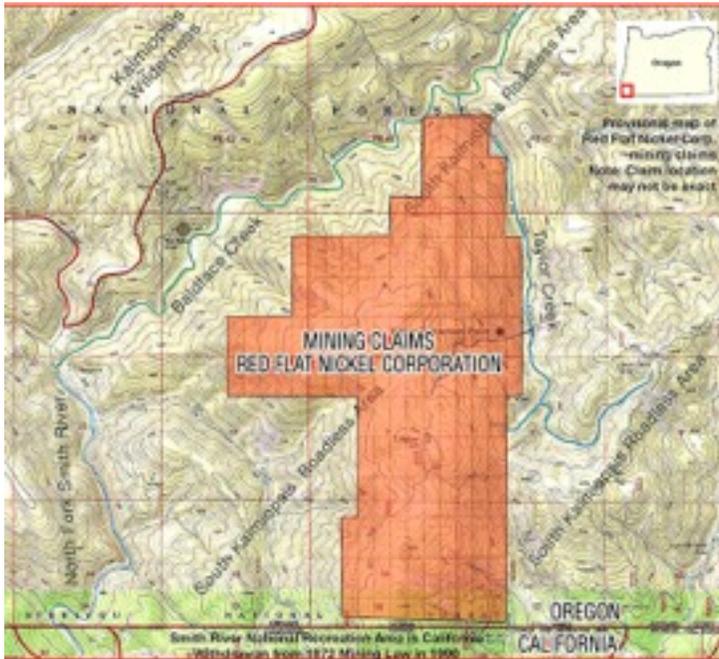
"Can I just get a hand count of anyone who doesn't want us to send a letter opposing this?" Supervisor Mike Sullivan asked the audience at the beginning of the public hearing, most of whom had shown up for a chance to speak.

No one raised a hand.

And then there was the input, which at both meetings touched on various issues surrounding the drilling proposal, ranging from apocalyptic to practical.

Many of the comments referred to what the drilling operation will eventually lead to: surface mining, or "strip mining," as it's commonly called.

"Is this the first step?" former Del Norte County Superior Court Judge Robert Weir asked. "I suppose the only possible way that it's not is if they say, 'We suddenly discovered there's no nickel here.' They're not spending this money because they want to engage in a scientific study. They're doing it because they want to get the nickel out of there and make money."



The claims are just outside the Smith River National Recreation Area and North Fork Wild and Scenic corridor, where mining is already prohibited. Courtesy of Kalmiopsis Wild

Eileen Cooper, a county resident who is also an active member of local environmental group Friends of Del Norte, said “the purpose of the project is for strip mining” and “to turn the whole area north of us into a huge mining district,” which, she said, would affect the local community in many ways.

“I’m very concerned for all of our interests — in economics, in fisheries, in recreation. Our ‘Wild Rivers Coast’ that we stand for, our clean water. All of these interests are so vital to our community,” Cooper said.

Board members agreed.

“If this is just the first step to do some massive strip mining, then I’m adamantly opposed to it,” Sullivan said

‘No impact to Smith River’

“I don’t know if I would classify it as a strip mine but people are going to call it what they call it,” said Obie Strickler, an agent to RFNC. “This is a surface mining project based on the location of those resources.”

The resources sought by Red Flat — nickel, cobalt, chromium and scandium — are directly on top of the surface.

“You could walk up and pick it up with your hand,” Strickler said.

That’s why the company only plans to drill 50 feet into the ground with 59 3-inch diameter holes.

“The exploratory drilling will have no impact to the Smith River watershed or the citizens of Del Norte County,” Strickler said, adding that the project was designed to have limited to no environmental impact. The company is using a helicopter to fly in

“extremely small” drilling equipment that “fits in the back of a standard-size pickup truck.”

Strickler said that RFNC designed the project to have minimal impact with the region’s environmental concerns in mind.

“Mining is controversial, and there’s been a lot of bad precedent from historical operations, but there’s been a lot of regulatory requirement changes, and rightly so there are much more stringent requirements,” Strickler said.

“Impacts from discharge are relatively nonexistent,” Strickler said, because the minerals of interest are non-sulphide components.

Mining jobs

Strickler stressed that it’s early in the process and test drilling is needed to show if there is a valuable deposit, but if there is, a full-scale mining project could bring jobs to the region.

“We believe this project has the potential to create several hundred jobs for a part of Oregon that has very high unemployment, thereby creating significant revenue to the local tax base. But until we know the size of the deposit, we don’t know the economic impact. We won’t know the size of the deposit until we complete the test drilling.”

Strickler said Del Norte, Curry and Josephine counties would all provide a pool of potential workers that could find employment in mining, and the indirect effects on employment in the region could be greater. Community members questioned whether this would be the case, however.

During the public hearings, some Del Norte residents pointed out that a project in Oregon would not benefit local tax revenue and questioned whether Del Norters would be employed by such an operation.

“There will be no tax revenues raised to support local government,” Weir said. “It’s far enough away that nobody here could safely commute there in reasonable fashion. There are no Del Norte County jobs going to be created by this thing. There’s no upside to Del Norte County at all from this project, and considerable risk.”

Hand-in-hand with the public concern for a lack of direct economic benefits were the city’s concerns surrounding impacts to the river, as outlined in its letter.

“In addition to providing drinking water to the City’s municipal water users, the Smith River offers a multitude of recreational activities including kayaking, rafting, swimming,

and fishing,” the Crescent City Council’s letter reads. “The Smith River and its tributaries are the spawning grounds and habitat for a world-class fishery (salmon, steelhead, cutthroat trout). These recreational and fishing opportunities are not only enjoyed and valued by local residents, they are also an important feature of the region’s tourist industry.”

But Strickler questioned the impact of collecting “naturally occurring material” that is already on the region’s surface. Lubricants and additives may be used in drilling, but only if approved by the Forest Service — if the agency raises any concerns about specific additives, RFNC will avoid using them, Strickler said.

“We want to follow the correct environmental regulations,” Strickler said.

Public comments shared with Del Norte County and Crescent City elected officials this week, however, cast a lot of doubt on mining’s impacts to the Smith River.

“I just want to say as a property owner, if you play this out, property values are going to plummet,” county resident Janet Gilbert said. “No one’s going to want to come to a toxic river, and our whole economy is going to plummet. It’s just a lose-lose situation for us, and really for the United States. Maybe a few jobs in Oregon, but the rest of us lose.”

Strickler said that RFNC wants to hear the public’s concerns, respond to them and educate people on the small impact of the project the company has planned.

“For a project of this limited impact it’s been a little surprising to see such a volume of opposition and documents,” Strickler said.

Staff writer Adam Spencer contributed to this report. Reach Aaron West at awest@triplicate.com.

Note - the Dell North Board of Commissioners and City of Crescent City’s Council meeting are on line at:

- Del Norte County Board of Supervisors Meeting, Monday, July 7, 2014. Del Norte County comment letter discussion and vote starts at 23:20. <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/49719703>
- City of Crescent City City Council 7/7/2014 - City comment letter discussion and vote at 52:00 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLpM3g7YdI4>