

ROCK CREEK ALLIANCE

FROM OUR MOUNTAINS TO OUR LAKE

Hecla Mining: Latest Owner of the Rock Creek and Montanore Projects

Last summer, in a board-approved merger, Hecla Mining acquired the now closed Troy Mine and the neighboring Rock Creek Project from the cash strapped Revett Minerals. Hecla is now the fourth owner since the Rock Creek Mine began the permitting process in the mid-1990's. Recently it was announced that Hecla intends to acquire the Montanore Mine from Mines Management, Inc. of Spokane, becoming the third company that has sought a permit for this mine. This development means that instead of two companies vying for permits for these mines, we are now dealing with one owner, at least for now. So just who is Hecla Mining Co., and should we be more concerned than ever?

Unlike Mines Management and Revett Minerals that had never operated a mine, or had done so only briefly in the case of the latter's Troy Mine, Hecla has been in operation for many years and has a track record that easily can be examined. Its operations include the Grouse Creek and Lucky Friday Mines in Idaho and the Greens Creek Mine in Alaska.

In 1992, the Salmon Challis National Forest permitted the Grouse Creek Mine, assuring the public that "the tailings impoundment is a zero discharge facility" and "no significant impacts on water quality are expected to occur from the proposed project." Located adjacent to the largest wilderness complex in the lower 48 states, it was heralded as a "state-of-the-art" mine when it began operations.

Before the first gold was even produced, the mine leaked cyanide into area waters. In one instance, just as adult salmon were migrating into the area to spawn, a pipe broke at the mine, spilling cyanide solution for about 40 minutes. Cyanide was soon found in a creek at levels of 1.31 parts per million - 60 times greater than levels toxic to fish. In another cyanide spill, 5,000 gallons contaminated the mine's mill yard. From 1995 to 1999, Hecla violated water quality standards repeatedly and was cited 100's of times. In 2000, cleanup was ordered under CERCLA for a time critical removal action (Superfund) due to imminent threat to human health and the environment.

The Grouse Creek Mine ended up operating for only three years and then shut its doors — producing no profits and leaving behind a legacy of long-term water pollution.

Hecla's Lucky Friday Mine has also not been so lucky. From 2009 to 2014, the EPA documented nearly 500 violations of the company's federal discharge permit. In 2015, Hecla was fined \$600,000 in fines. Violations included seepage of metal-laden water from the tailings pond into a tributary of the South Fork of the Coeur d' Alene River, runoff during construction of a new tailings pond, and failure to properly report problems to EPA. The Lucky Friday Mine is the single largest contributor of heavy metals to the South Fork of the Coeur d' Alene River upstream of Mullan, Idaho.

The Greens Creek Mine is located in Southeast Alaska on the northern end of Admiralty Island, within Admiralty Island National Monument. In the 1980's, the Forest Service predicted

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Cabinet Mountains Wilderness
Photo By: Ken Vanden Heuvel



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Hope

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that there would be no impact from metals leaching or acid mine drainage at the Greens Creek Mine. In 2000, lab and field tests at the mine showed that the tailings and waste rock have "significant potential" to generate acid and are currently leaching heavy metals. Monitoring conducted by Greens Creek in 2001 and 2002, showed that sulfate and heavy metals leaching from waste rock piles into ground and surface waters were increasing. In February 2003, the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation documented acid mine drainage at Greens Creek for the first time.

According to the Greens Creek FEIS and ROD; "Modeling, based upon water quality data collected from the tailings disposal facility during the last 20 years of operations, predicts that contact water will not meet water quality standards after closure, and that the water will require treatment in post-closure for hundreds of years, perhaps into perpetuity."

Despite repeated claims by Hecla that its Green Creek Mine is environmentally friendly, the development of acid mine

drainage, and the need for perpetual monitoring and treatment as is proposed for the Rock Creek Mine, make this a mine that should never have been constructed. Making matters worse, it's located within a national monument, and adjacent to a national wilderness (Kootznoowoo), that is home to Alaskan brown bear, whales, salmon, and bald eagles.

When it comes to Hecla Mining and its operations, several themes are consistent. One is failure of the permitting agencies to make accurate predictions. The second is the development of long-term, serious water quality problems, and the third is repeated violations by the company. This is a pattern repeated at mines across the West, and what we should expect at the Rock Creek and Montanore Mines.

February brought the release of the Draft Supplemental EIS (DSEIS) for the Rock Creek mine. The issuance of this approximately 1,000-page document was accompanied by a 45-day comment period, which was not nearly long enough for us to read the EIS and accompanying technical documents, hire experts to conduct a thorough analysis, and formulate organizational comments. We, along with several of our partners, requested an extension of the comment period, which was ultimately granted.

In the process of writing our comments, we wanted to make sure that we identified and analyzed all of the critical components of the mine plan, including those that may become part of future legal challenges. To accomplish this, several experts were retained to look at various aspects of the mine plan. Their reviews addressed water quality impacts and the water treatment system; effects on the hydrology of the region including the dewatering of wilderness streams and lakes; impacts to fisheries; geochemistry of the ore, waste rock, and tailings; acid mine drainage and metals leaching; tailings impoundment stability; and bonding.

Our experts found that the DSEIS relies on hypotheses unsupported by data on multiple fronts, and, for this reason, should be withdrawn. Although the mine received its first approval from the Forest Service in 2001, mine owners are relying on outdated technology to handle and treat mine wastewater and tailings, and have failed to provide adequate data to characterize the many risks.

Of particular concern is the design of the tailings impoundment. It is no longer considered safe due to recent catastrophic failures of tailings dams in Brazil and British Columbia using the same construction methods proposed at Rock Creek. In addition, the seismic safety calculations required by Montana were not used. Equally troubling is the refusal of the Forest Service to require the company to backfill tailings into the underground mine, which would reduce the risk of tailings dam failure, lessen water quality impacts, and potentially allow the tailings impoundment to be located away from the river. Backfilling is standard practice for underground mines. Other issues of

utmost concern include the failure to collect adequate baseline data to characterize the potential for acid mine drainage, unacceptable and potentially illegal hydrological impacts that would dewater wilderness streams and alpine lakes, and impacts to bull trout and grizzly bears that would jeopardize local and regional populations.

Although the Forest Service held public informational open houses in several communities in Montana, none were scheduled in North Idaho. The Alliance requested that an open house be conducted in Sandpoint due to the interest and long-term involvement of the local downstream communities in Idaho. This request was denied, so we provided our own informational tabling at various locations in Sandpoint.

Whether intentional or an oversight, the failure of the Forest Service to seek input from Idaho residents raised questions about whether the agency really wanted to hear from those who might be critical of the project. The DSEIS presented the first real opportunity in nearly two decades to submit formal comments on the mine proposal, and we wanted to make sure that the public was aware of this opportunity and armed with adequate information. We know that many of you sent in comment letters, and your efforts are greatly appreciated.

Long-Awaited Draft Supplemental EIS (DSEIS) Released



Young Backpacker in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness
Photo By Woods Wheatcroft

RCA's Website has a New Look

If you haven't been to our website in a while, you'll want to check it out. Thanks to the web and graphic arts designers at Neokee Company, our website has a new attractive look and is easy to navigate! We were especially thrilled that the folks at Neokee were able to launch our new site just in time to provide information to the public during the NEPA process for the Supplemental EIS.

We still have lots of work to do to update all of the text, but be sure to check our site and look for action alerts and announcements of upcoming events.

Our web address is:
www.rockcreekalliance.org.



FROM OUR MOUNTAINS TO OUR LAKE



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CDA
LEWISTON



An Update From Save Our Cabinets on the Montanore Mine

In December 2015, the Kootenai National Forest and Montana's DEQ issued a joint Final EIS for the Montanore mine. The agencies then diverged when each issued its own Record of Decision (ROD), with the Forest Service issuing a full approval for the mine, but DEQ only issuing a partial approval. The decision by Montana DEQ to issue a separate, partial approval that only authorized the exploratory phase of the project arose from concerns that the full mine would violate the non-degradation statute of Montana's Water Quality Act by dewatering Outstanding Natural Resource Waters. Montana DEQ Director Tom Livers was quoted in the press admitting that the mine may not be able to stand up to legal challenges due to continuing concerns about the impacts to surrounding waterways. These waterways include the East Fork of the Bull River, Rock Creek, and the East Fork of Rock Creek. Rock Lake and St. Paul Lake also would be impacted by dewatering, and could possibly be drained.

In spite of Director Livers' concerns, Montana DEQ subsequently released a draft discharge permit for the mine for public review and comment. Our attorney reviewed the permit and found that it will violate the Montana Water Quality Act, the federal Clean Water Act, and governing state and federal regulations. Among her concerns are reliance on unspecified Best Management Practices that the mining company will choose after the permit is finalized as a substitute for enforceable discharge limits, failure to address harm to bull trout from sediment and warm-water discharges, and the establishment of "interim effluent limitations" that would allow the mining company to degrade water quality for 20 years.

While we were disappointed that the Forest Service chose to permit the mine, despite its own findings that underground mining operations would cause drastic and permanent draw downs in wilderness streams, we were not surprised. Accordingly, in April 2016, the second lawsuit challenging the Montanore mine was filed on behalf of Save Our Cabinets contesting the Forest Service's ROD that approves the full mine. This lawsuit is now in front of the same judge who has been assigned to the case that was filed on our behalf last year, which disputes the US Fish and Wildlife Service's findings of no jeopardy to grizzly bears and bull trout.

Save Our Cabinets has a new web address: www.saveourcabinets.net. Unfortunately, after our former web host neglected to renew our domain name, saveourcabinets.org was acquired by a Chinese company, which wanted us to pay several hundred dollars to buy it back.

Please let Leanne Marten know how much you care about our outstanding Cabinet Mountains Wilderness and Lake Pend Oreille. Your phone call and email will make a difference! Decision makers do weigh public opinion, whether they admit it or not.

Leanne Marten
Regional Forester
lmarten@fs.fed.us
406-329-3315

We now have a new web host, Keokee Company, and hope to update our site in the coming months. If you are looking for more information, you can contact us at info@saveourcabinets.net. Save Our Cabinets also has a Facebook page for sharing news and information related to the proposed mine.

In Brief: Montanore's Impacts

The Final EIS for the mine predicts significant reductions in base flow in wilderness rivers, lakes, and streams overlying the mine area due to the diversion of regional groundwater into the underground mine. Some streams like the East Fork of Bull River and the East Fork of Rock Creek would be 100% dewatered by the end of mine life, and would take 1,200 to 1,300 years to recover fully—if ever.

The operations phase is predicted to lower groundwater as much as 1,000 feet near Rock Lake, effectively dewatering or draining the lake and drying up Rock Creek Meadows in the process. The loss of groundwater recharge could also potentially cause St. Paul Lake, which already suffers from a lack of water during late summer and early fall, to dry up completely.

The Fish and Wildlife Service found that the mine would not only permanently dewater streams on which bull trout depend, but increase stream temperatures to levels that are intolerable for bull trout, pollute bull trout habitat with harmful sediment, and promote the intrusion of non-native fish that kill or compete with bull trout.

The Fish and Wildlife Service also found that the Montanore Mine would displace up to seventy-five percent of adult female grizzly bears in the Cabinet Mountains from their preferred habitat, worsen habitat fragmentation, and bring more than 800 new people into the heart of grizzly bear habitat, increasing greatly the likelihood that grizzly bears will be killed due to poaching and conflicts with humans.

Save Our Cabinets' Website

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We are asking all of our members to contact the Regional Forester in Missoula, Leanne Marten, who oversees Region One, which includes the Kootenai and Panhandle National Forests among other forests in the Northern Rockies.

Action Alert: You Can Help!

The authority to deny a permit for the Rock Creek Mine will ultimately lie with the Regional Forester. While she is not new to our area, having lived and worked in both Idaho and Montana, Leanne Marten needs to hear the concerns of downstream residents and all those who care about the fate of the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness. You can bet she is hearing from Hecla Mining and the politicians the company has influenced.

Here is a quote from a USFS press release when Leanne Marten was appointed Regional Forester in July 2015 after an appointment in Washington, D.C.: "I started my career in Idaho," commented Marten. "Having worked in many places, I am so fortunate to be back here where the landscapes are breathtaking and the people care greatly about their outstanding natural resources."

While we were disappointed that the Forest Service chose to permit the mine, despite its own findings that underground mining operations would cause drastic and permanent draw downs in wilderness streams, we were not surprised. Accordingly, in April 2016, the second lawsuit challenging the Montanore mine was filed on behalf of Save Our Cabinets contesting the Forest Service's ROD that approves the full mine. This lawsuit is now in front of the same judge who has been assigned to the case that was filed on our behalf last year, which disputes the US Fish and Wildlife Service's findings of no jeopardy to grizzly bears and bull trout.

FROM OUR MOUNTAINS TO OUR LAKE



At What Cost?

Dear Members,

This spring brought major developments in the permitting process for both the Rock Creek and Montanore Mines. The Montanore Mine has now been permitted, and the Rock Creek Mine may receive new authorization from the Forest Service to begin construction within the next twelve months. Intricately tied together, these two mines are seeking ore from what the industry refers to as "World Class Ore Bodies." From our perspective, in the process of mining ore from beneath the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness, they would destroy a "World Class Wilderness," setting a dangerous precedent for protected wilderness areas everywhere. Add the perpetual pollution and dewatering of watersheds critical to our recreation economy and native fisheries, and the construction of these mines will cause long-term and irrevocable harm to those amenities that make our homes in western Montana and North Idaho so special.

We don't often have enough to report to you to fill the pages of a newsletter; but the events of the last several months are not only newsworthy, but quite significant. We hope that you will find our newsletter informative, so that as a member and ambassador for our Lake and Wilderness, you are able to help us keep other community members informed and engaged.

My take away message is that the fight to stop both of these mines is far from over, but, now more than ever, we need your involvement. You can help just by sending one email or making one phone call to the Regional Forester in Missoula, Leanne Marten, to ask her to deny a permit for the Rock Creek Mine. She is being pressured by industry and Montana's congressional delegation to get both these mines constructed. She needs to hear from all of us who understand that the short-term jobs these mines would generate come at too great a cost to the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness and to our regional watersheds, including the Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Watershed. That one email or phone call is important because it will help in our collective efforts to demonstrate wide-spread opposition!

This summer's edition of Sandpoint Magazine contains a full-page ad that is requesting folks to contact the Regional Forester. We hope it inspires many phone calls and emails! Look for it there and on the facing page in this newsletter.

For the Lake and Wilderness,
Mary Costello
Executive Director

**HELP US
PREVENT
SANDPOINT
AS A MINING
DISASTER.**

**Our lake is at stake.
Raise your voice to stop this mine.**

Which would truly be a disaster.

Contact us for more of the depressing details, or to become a member of our alliance. And, above all, please...

Once again, they say it will do no harm despite a perpetual discharge of heavy metals into the Clark Fork River.

Once again, they contend their massive tailings pile poses no threat even though it would be big enough to cover all of downtown Sandpoint under 300 feet of sludge.

So, once again, it's time for businesses, homeowners, visitors and friends to unite or this time, the mine could be built.

Write or call: Leanne Marten,
Regional Forester, lmarten@fs.fed.us
(406) 329-3315
Urge her to deny this permit.

Sandpoint has everything to lose and absolutely nothing to gain from this monster of a mine.

ROCK CREEK
ALLIANCE
208.610-4896
www.rockcreekalliance.org

Save the Date!

The Rock Creek Alliance's Board of Directors is busy planning our Annual Party. This year, it will be held on Thursday, September 22. We'll have our usual fun auction items, music, and appetizers. We'll also have new t-shirts and hats on hand. Look for our postcard invitation in the mail. As always, we will do our best to make it a fun and informative evening!



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Current resident, or:

Please note the date by your name to check your membership expiration date. Thank You!

PROTECTING OUR WATER AND QUALITY OF LIFE



Rock Creek Alliance is a non-profit organization formed by citizens, conservationists, and outdoor sports enthusiasts to protect our public lands and water resources from proposed mining activities within the lower Clark Fork River—Lake Pend Oreille Watershed

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