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Canadian Firm Proposes Opening Grass Valley Mine

Public comments are due by August 17, 2020

County Announces “Public Hearing” Will Be a Pre-recorded Presentation

Grass Valley, CA – Nevada County recently announced that a long-awaited public process will begin on a controversial proposal by Canadian mining company RISE Gold Corp. to reopen the historic Idaho-Maryland Mine.

Located in Grass Valley, the mine last operated in 1956 and shut down due to financial difficulties and diminishing production. Yet it left behind a legacy of both a legendary gold mine and a prolific amount of environmental damage.

The lure of possible untapped riches has continued to this day. As recently as eight years ago, the previous owner, Emgold Mining, abandoned its second effort to open the mine due to an inability to resolve environmental issues and exhausted financial resources. Now RISE Gold is betting on succeeding where others have failed and has submitted mining permit application documents to the Nevada County Planning Department.

On Friday, July 17, Nevada County released a Notice of Preparation (NOP) that summarized the project and starts the public review process. Citizens are invited to give comments and feedback on the plan by August 17, 2020. There will be no virtual public hearing. Instead the public is invited to watch a pre-recorded presentation that will be posted for public viewing by July 27th. Citizens will not be able to give verbal comments, but are being asked to instead send a letter with their concerns to the county.

Community Environmental Advocates Foundation (CEA Foundation) members have asked the County to extend the deadline on the comment period until September 16th so that the public has adequate time to review the proposal and send in their concerns. “This is a massive and complex project with a permit application of over 100 documents. To serve the public interests and assure that all the potential impacts are studied, we are asking the county to provide more than the minimal 30 day review period,” stated Ralph Silberstein, CEA Foundation President.

According to project documents, mining will take place 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The main access to the mine and processing facilities will be located at the 119 acre New Brunswick site located at the corner of Brunswick and East Bennett Roads. About 1500 tons of waste rock and tailings will be processed from the mine daily, with most of it being deposited on-site or trucked to the 56 acre former mine site on Idaho-Maryland Road west of Centennial Drive. Over the course of 11 years, these built up “engineered fill” piles of mine waste will cover 75 total acres to heights of up to 90 feet. They will be
graded on top so that they may be utilized for future development. The mine waste will be transported by trucks making up to 100 round trips per day, 16 hours per day, 7 days per week.

“I don’t think people have an understanding of how impactful this would be to our community. We’re looking at two gravel quarry type operations in Grass Valley built upon two sites covering a total of 75 acres, more than 100 truck trips daily, and all the noise and dust associated with that,” added Silberstein.

Three years ago, a Canadian firm, Rise Gold purchased the properties and began preparatory work. A prolonged period of exploratory drilling was a constant source of irritation to the neighbors due to round-the-clock noise, and numerous complaints were filed.

Already, conservation organizations, local residents, and community groups have expressed concerns about the mine’s impact on air quality, noise, traffic, groundwater, local habitat, and threats to domestic wells in the area. The proposed highly industrial mine site is surrounded by residential neighborhoods.

One major issue from the previous effort to open the mine was the impact of dewatering the miles of underground tunnels, requiring pumping out 2,500 acre feet of groundwater into South Fork Wolf Creek initially, and then perpetually pumping after that. All of this water must be treated to remove pollutants.

In addition to the impacts of the proposed dewatering, the plan indicates that a long stretch of the creek will be encased in pipes to act as an underground storm drain for the entire property. “We are concerned about the non-stop discharge of large amounts of water from the mine into the creek,” stated Jonathan Keehn of the Wolf Creek Community Alliance. “South Wolf Creek should not be treated like a storm drain.” Keehn added, “We are concerned about chemical pollution from mining operations and about local wells becoming polluted or going dry.”

Residents in the area are also expressing concern about the impact on their neighborhoods, quality of life, and home values. The proposed buildup of mine waste rock and tailings on the main Brunswick site backs up to rural residential neighborhoods where people have settled seeking peace and quiet in the natural settings amongst the trees.

“When we bought our home, the nearby Brunswick site was zoned for light industrial, which didn’t concern us. But to open this mine, they need to rezone it, which will change the very nature of the area we live in,” stated Christy Hubbard, a resident of Grass Valley. And like many of our neighbors for miles around, we live on a well that produces the sweetest water and costs practically nothing. It’s not clear to me that any expert could absolutely guarantee we won't lose that.”

Strong local opposition to reopening mines is certainly not a new thing in Nevada County, but recent history raised the level of concern to new heights following the opening of the [Siskon Mine] in 1995. After posting a significant bond and gaining assurances that the wells in the area were safe from the impacts of dewatering the mine, a permit was granted, only to find that within a short period of time wells were sucked dry and rendered unusable.

“Water is the most precious resource in our foothill communities. In the mid-1990s as a result of Siskon Gold Corporation operations we lost numerous residential wells on the San Juan Ridge due to catastrophic dewatering of our aquifer, explained Sol Henson of the San Juan Ridge Taxpayers Association. “This included the loss of the well at Grizzly Hill School, the primary grade school on the
Ridge. Since that event 25 years ago, Grizzly Hill School still has to treat its water for contaminants as a result of that mining activity. Much like the dewatering plan proposed by RISE, Siskon promised everything and then suddenly our wells were ruined. We hope history doesn't repeat itself."

The Notice of Preparation is available on the county website: https://www.mynevadacounty.com/3054/Environmental-Impact-Report

Information on how to submit a letter to the County can be found at https://www.cea-nc.org/mining/now-is-the-time-make-sure-the-county-is-asking-the-right-questions-about-idaho-maryland-mine/

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The mission of the Community Environmental Advocates Foundation (CEA Foundation) is to perform research, education, and advocacy to promote public policy and actions resulting in responsible land use and environmental protection in Nevada County and the Sierra Nevada region. https://www.cea-nc.org/

The Wolf Creek Community Alliance (WCCA) is a volunteer-run 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, focused primarily on cleaning up Wolf Creek and restoring this neglected community resource to a condition of optimal health and integrity, for the benefit of all of its human and wild inhabitants. https://www.wolfcreekalliance.org/

The primary purpose of the San Juan Ridge Taxpayers Association is to promote the environmental, social and economic well-being of the San Juan Ridge community, located in Nevada County, California. https://www.sjrtaxpayers.org/