Concerns Raised about Pebble Mine Study Process

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JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — The group behind a massive copper and gold prospect near a world premier salmon fishery has released what has been billed as "one of the most exhaustive environmental study programs in the history of U.S. mineral development."

The Pebble Limited Partnership, in some 27,000 pages of data and analysis, purports to provide an in-depth look at the environmental and social conditions in southwest Alaska's Bristol Bay region. Pebble Vice President for Environment Ken Taylor said the data, as well as ongoing studies, are critical for monitoring and ensuring that the Pebble Mine project does not alter the pristine environment.

The work has been dismissed by some environmentalists, fishermen and others as bought-and-paid-for science that should be viewed as tilted in favor of development. Taylor said this is a standard response from opponents and is "ridiculous." He said some consultants who helped Pebble also do work for federal agencies and that they're credible, objective scientists.

But this isn't the first time concerns have been raised about Pebble's study process.

Correspondence between state and federal agencies, obtained through a public records request by Trout Unlimited and provided to The Associated Press, shows frustration and sometimes doubt about the working groups Pebble established to provide expertise as the project moves toward the permitting phase.

"The current process is beneficial to Pebble Partners. However, the process is not beneficial to the Agencies," according to minutes from what was called the fish technical working group in a Jan. 9, 2008 meeting. "Pebble Partners need to provide additional information for the process to be useful to the Agencies."

"This is getting to be a huge time sink for agencies and at this point it does not seem like a good use of our time," Phil Brna, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Biologist, wrote in an email to working group colleagues on Dec. 23, 2008.

"It's virtually impossible to provide substantive review comments when (Pebble) doesn't disclose more details of their development plans and their contractors only occasionally share snippets of the data they've collected," Ted Otis, of the Alaska Fish and Game Department, said in response to Brna's message.

The state Department of Natural Resources helped set up an interagency steering committee to guide the scope of and address concerns raised by the working groups. Working group meetings began in mid-2007, when some studies were

already under way, and they continued until January 2010, when Pebble ended the effort.

There were warnings of possible defections just months into the effort. The Army Corps of Engineers announced it would no longer participate in the working groups in January 2009, citing lack of information.

In an interview, Brna said the agencies felt like Pebble was not really answering their questions. He said the agencies were never even able to sort out with Pebble the questions that should be addressed.

"It's one thing to have sufficient information for permitting. It's another thing to have sufficient information to study the effects of a mine over time, over the life of the mine," he said. "And we felt we needed to do both of those."

"I'm sure some of the stuff for ground water, there's probably not any better ground water data anywhere, or some of the surface water stuff, or the chemical constituents in the water or the rock, all that stuff is probably pretty amazing," Brna said. "But when it comes to some of the fish stuff, I think that's when the agencies have more concern."

Kate Harper, with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, said each agency has its priorities, and people with different expertise have certain things they'd like to see. She said Fish and Game must decide what it believes is necessary for Pebble to address.

The Pebble project has been the subject of a heated PR battle for years. Supporters say it would bring much-needed jobs to economically-depressed rural Alaska but opponents fear it could fundamentally change the landscape and disrupt if not destroy a way of life. Some of Pebble's own ads simply urge a "factual" conversation about the project.

The mine is a joint venture of Canada-based Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd. and Anglo American plc of the United Kingdom.

The companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars scoping the deposit, which Pebble, on its website, calls one of the large deposits of its kind in the world with the potential of producing 80.6 billion pounds of copper, 107.4 million ounces of gold and 5.6 billion pounds of molybdenum over decades.

Taylor called the deposit "a strategic national resource," saying the U.S. imports about 40 percent of its copper. The mine would be above Iliamna Lake, the largest producer of sockeye salmon in the world. Taylor said he'd be "gone in a heartbeat" if anything came up showing the project couldn't be developed in an environmentally responsible way.

Taylor, who was hired in 2008, said he thinks the biggest frustration among working group members was the lack of a project description, include details on where infrastructure like a mill or tailing facility would be.

"They were ready to say, 'OK, let's see what you're going to do, and we'll see if you have the right information or if you're studies are focused on the right things.' It was very difficult for them to meet month after month, year after year, without having anything in front of them," he said in an interview.

Without that information, he said, it was "hard for them to figure out" what the impacts would be and what needed to be mitigated.

Taylor said it's possible the project could advance to the permitting phase as early as this year, and a full project description would surely come then.

Doug Limpinsel, a biologist with NOAA Fisheries who was involved in the working group process, said one of his biggest unanswered questions is: How many fish are going to be removed?

Limpinsel said it would be a great gesture if Pebble, which spent a reported $150 million compiling the report, spent another $100 million building off that with agency input.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is also conducting a baseline watershed assessment, a draft of which it plans to release in late April. Agencies also will again review Pebble's studies to determine if they're sufficient once it applies for permits.

"With Pebble, everybody can be confident there will be a pretty rigorous review of that information," said Tom Crafford, the director of project management and permitting for the state Department of Natural Resources.

Lindsey Bloom, a program manager with Trout Unlimited, said the state has never rejected a large mining project, and it will be relying on Pebble's own studies, going back to the company if it needs more information. Bloom and others say one has to question whether Pebble's work can be trusted.

Said Taylor, "We're not encouraging people to support us at this point. There's nothing to support. Wait until there's a project out, and let it go through the process."

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http://www.chem.info/news/2012/02/concerns-raised-about-pebble-mine-study-process