Panel Taking Comments on Alaska Mine Study

BECKY BOHRER, Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — A panel convened Tuesday to begin evaluating the science behind a federal study that found large-scale mining near the headwaters of Bristol Bay could hurt the productivity and sustainability of one of the world's premier salmon fisheries.

The watershed assessment was conducted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in response to concerns about development of a massive large copper-and-gold prospect in the Bristol Bay region. The draft report was released in May, with a final report that could affect permitting decisions for the proposed Pebble Mine perhaps coming by the end of the year, after the scientific peer review panel weighs in and public comments are analyzed.

EPA Regional Administrator Dennis McLerran said the focus, at this point in the process, is on "getting the science right."

The review panel, selected by EPA contractor Versar from a list of publicly nominated candidates and those Versar found on its own, is intended to act as a cross-check on the science used by EPA. The panel's findings are expected to be published this fall, and used by EPA to help identify areas of concern that might need more attention or additional analysis.

The panel opened three days of meetings in Anchorage on Tuesday, with the first day reserved for public comment focused on specific topics.

Critics of the EPA draft , including officials with the group behind the mine project, the Pebble Limited Partnership, called the study rushed, flawed and based on a theoretical mine project the likes of which would never be permitted in the U.S. Supporters of the EPA's effort see it as a step toward protecting the region against harmful mining activity.

John Shively, Pebble CEO, said EPA based its study on a "fantasy" mine, with no basis in reality.

McLerran, talking to reporters, dismissed that claim.

The assessment was billed as a look at the impacts of the kind of mining needed to successfully develop the deposit, not an in-depth assessment of any specific project. It used a hypothetical mine scenario — but one that McLerran said drew in part on plans and data put forth by Pebble and Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd.

The Pebble Mine is a joint venture between Northern Dynasty and Anglo American plc.

Pebble says the prospect is one of the largest of its kind in the world, with the potential of producing 80.6 billion pounds of copper, 5.6 billion pounds of molybdenum and 107.4 million ounces of gold. Supporters of the mine say it would bring much-needed jobs to economically depressed rural Alaska, but opponents fear it could disrupt, if not destroy, a way of life in the region.

Sarah McCarr, who works for Pebble, became emotional describing limited employment opportunities in the region and how she wouldn't be able to stay there without a good job like she has now.

Some commenters who praised EPA's effort Tuesday also suggested areas for further analysis. Sue Mauger, science director for Cook Inletkeeper, recommended EPA look at how climate change might further compound the potential for habitat loss for fish due to mining activity.

McLerran said EPA received more than 220,000 comments on its draft assessment, many of which came on form letters, with "well over 90 percent" of total commenters supportive of EPA's work on the draft. The comment period closed last month, above objections from state leaders and others, who sought an extension.

EPA has gotten push-back from resource development groups and the state of Alaska, among others, who consider the agency's actions to be premature and an overreach.

Alaska Attorney General Michael Geraghty, for example, has raised concerns that the assessment could lead to EPA vetoing mining activity.

Those speaking Tuesday had registered to do so in advance of the meeting.

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Associated Press writer Mark Thiessen contributed to this report from Anchorage, Alaska.

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