Mining Company Expected to Finish Wis. Test Bores

TODD RICHMOND, Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A company looking to dig a large iron mine just south of Lake Superior is set to finish exploratory drilling, setting up a lull that could dampen tensions with protesters, at least for a while.

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources officials say Gogebic Taconite workers should finish drilling their eighth and final test hole in the Penokee Hills within three or four days. The test boring is designed to help the company determine if mining in the area is economically feasible as well as what minerals lay within potential waste rock and the pollution risk they might pose, said Ann Coakley, director of the DNR's waste and materials management bureau.

Gogebic Taconite officials next want to remove larger rock samples from five sites in the area, an effort known as bulk sampling. The company would haul those samples to a test plant, where they would be processed into final taconite pellets to give the company an idea of total processing time, Coakley said.

The DNR hasn't granted a permit for that operation yet, though. Agency officials asked the company two weeks ago for more details on the plan, including what kind of explosives would be used, air emission estimates, a site wetland inventory and anti-erosion and anti-pollution measures. Coakley said the company had not responded to the request as of Monday morning.

Once the company supplies the specifics, the DNR will hold a public hearing on the request, Coakley said. That could take place sometime in August, she said. Actual sampling likely wouldn't begin until September or October, she said.

Gogebic Taconite wants to excavate a 4½-mile-long open pit mine in the forested hills. The project has been a flashpoint of contention for environmentalists, who say the mine will scar the landscape and leach minerals and compounds that would pollute the water-rich region.

Protesters have gathered in the woods around the site. They confronted mine workers there last month. A protester from Stevens Point was charged with robbery by force in that incident after she allegedly took a camera from one of the mine workers.

A video of the incident shows hooded protesters emerging from the woods and shouting profanities at mine workers. The female protester and worker with the camera wrestle for the device, scuffling around the site before the protester finally rips it free and runs off.

Gogebic Taconite responded by posting masked, camouflaged guards armed with rifles at the site last week, sparking criticism of the move as overkill.

Bulletproof Securities, the Arizona security firm that supplied the guards, pulled them out of the area on Wednesday because they weren't licensed to operate in Wisconsin. They're working to secure licenses and return, however. Bulletproof Securities spokeswoman Stacy Pearson said the company submitted its final license application materials to state regulators on Friday and expect approval within two or three days.

"Wisconsin is in an unusual position given how passionate people are, but this work is done all the time," Pearson said. "Once the police response is done, then a security group comes in and prevents other incidents from happening. This happens across the country every day."

Gogebic Taconite spokesman Bob Seitz said the company has since turned to a number of Wisconsin-based security firms with valid licenses to guard the site around the clock in shifts. He said he wasn't sure when Bulletproof might return or how long Gogebic Taconite might need to gather the additional bulk sampling information the DNR wants.

"We're kind of looking forward to things easing up for a while," Seitz said. "I think it's good to let the rhetoric kind of cool down. That will give people a chance to step back from it."

Republican Gov. Scott Walker has touted the mine as a major job creator and signed a bill this spring loosening Wisconsin's mining regulations to ease the path for Gogebic Taconite. He said Bulletproof Securities needs to obtain the proper licenses but he doesn't blame the mining company for turning to the company.

"You had protesters who did more than protest. They came up dressed like ninjas, masks and covered up," Walker said Monday following a bill signing in Watertown. "As we see by these extremists on the video, this isn't just somebody sitting in front of a site or even chaining themselves to a tree. I can feel for the employees there. They felt a real threat. ... My hope is cooler heads will prevail and in the end those who oppose the mine will realize this sort of intimidation has no place in the state of Wisconsin."

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Associated Press writer Scott Bauer in Watertown contributed to this report.

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