

Contentious Mining Regulations Hit Maine Statehouse

ALANNA DURKIN, Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Maine (AP) — A proposed overhaul of Maine's mining regulations made its way to state lawmakers on Monday as supporters and critics remain deeply divided over whether expanded metallic mining is the answer to Maine's economic problems or will result in the demise of the natural resources that make the state special.

The proposed rules were crafted in light of renewed interest in mining of gold, silver copper and other metals in Aroostook County's Bald Mountain, but they continue to face fierce pushback from environmental groups and others who say they don't go far enough to protect Maine's environment from toxins like sulfur and arsenic.

"Sulfide ore metallic mining is something we need to do right, or not do at all," said Democratic Sen. Chris Johnson, of Somerville. "Because Maine's slogan is not 'I remember it before the acid and arsenic spoiled it.' Our slogan is 'The way life should be,'" he told the Environment and Natural Resources Committee during the public hearing on Monday.

Metallic mining operations were conducted in Maine in the 1960s and '70s but have remained dormant since. New Brunswick-based J.D. Irving Ltd., which purchased Bald Mountain in the late 1990s, has been exploring the possibility of mining there. But officials said current mining regulations are so restrictive that doing so would be virtually impossible and pushed for Maine to come up with new rules.

Republican Gov. Paul LePage signed a law that put in motion the overhaul of Maine's two-decade-old regulations in 2012. The Board of Environmental Protection approved the proposed rules in January.

Supporters of the new regulations, including the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, urged lawmakers on Monday to consider the importance of bringing economic development to northern Maine, which is still reeling from the recession. The company says mining Bald Mountain could bring as many as 700 jobs to the region.

"The population in Aroostook declined over the past few years and will continue to without the industry and the development of good jobs to attract ambitious new residents and offer gratifying employment to residents," said Teresa Fowler, executive director of the Central Aroostook Chamber of Commerce, which represents 13 communities in the county.

Environmental groups and many residents of Aroostook County have raised

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

concerns about the regulations crafted by the Department of Environmental Protection, like the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes a "mining area," where eliminated groundwater contamination would be allowed. The vague language could allow for the contamination of thousands of acres, said Nick Bennett, a staff scientist for the Natural Resources Council of Maine.

Among the other issues Bennett pointed to in his written testimony to the committee is the lack of buffer zones for underground mines, which he said would pose a danger to the state's rivers, lakes and parks.

DEP officials defended the rules on Monday, saying that they're in line with what's required under the Maine Metallic **Mineral** Mining Act passed in 2012 and provide adequate environmental protections.

The committee will vote on the rules in the coming weeks before they're sent to the full Legislature.

Source URL (retrieved on 03/27/2015 - 7:57am):

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