

# Ore quest draws eco-fire

## MINING: Environmentalists take hard look at new extraction projects

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The Tulsequah Chief mine Redcorp Ventures hopes to build in northwestern B.C. has one of the most stunning views in the province.

From a hill above the proposed mine, you can watch the Tulsequah glacier grind through the forests and spires of the Coast range that ascend to Nelles Peak.

Redcorp and the environmentalists who loathe the proposed underground mine see two different things in the Tulsequah Valley vista.

For the company, the dazzling peaks are smeared with a history of regulatory anguish.

For eco-activists like the Transboundary Watershed Alliance, they're painted with toxic beauty. The mine and its access road, they say, would be an ecological menace to the wildlife-rich Taku River watershed.

The clash between industry and environmentalists over the proposed mine at Tulsequah Chief is being echoed at mining projects across B.C.

Mining companies, encouraged by revived mineral prices, are pushing projects at a pace unimaginable only four years ago.

The surge in the number of proposed mines has triggered a corresponding increase in project scrutiny -- often mounting to opposition -- from environmentalists and First Nations.

"The scrutiny was always there," says Michael McPhie, president of the Mining Association of B.C.

"The increased level of awareness and discussion that may be taking place publicly are directly related to the increased level of mining activity around the province."

B.C.'s environmental assessment office is currently fielding 12 mine applications. In 2001, there was only one major project in the approvals pipeline, McPhie said.

There's a lot at stake. If all the proposals become mines they would yield about \$3 billion in capital development, 2,400 direct operational jobs and 2,850 construction jobs, McPhie said.

Tim Gray, national conservation director with the Ottawa-based Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, sees a growing potential for conflict. The industry's improved economics has moved companies to pitch projects in ecologically fragile areas where there should be no mineral extraction, Gray says.

The court-ordered need to consult and accommodate First Nations about resource development has heightened native groups' awareness of the environmental impact of mining projects, says Jamie Kneen, communications co-ordinator with Ottawa-based MiningWatch Canada.

"There's more of a mood, particularly with the First Nations, to really take a closer look at what they're being offered or what they're being asked for," Kneen says.

It's not as if eco-activists are locking arms with First Nations to block miners. The relationship between environmentalists and First Nations has improved but is not always smooth when it comes to mining projects, Kneen says.

Environmentalists typically focus on protecting a wilderness, while First Nations may want to balance environmental values with economic development, he says.

"The interests are not always the same," Kneen says.

Gray believes Canada's environmental screening process for mines is geared toward approving any project entering the assessment pipeline. It becomes a question of how a company will mitigate any environmental impacts -- not whether a project should be allowed, according to Gray.

"The mines that don't go ahead are the ones that aren't viable economically or the ones where government pulls approval because of massive public backlash," he says.

The B.C. mining industry's concern with the regulatory process, primarily on the federal side, is its protracted nature, McPhie says. The lengthy process does not necessarily lead to better decisions, he says.

Vancouver-based Northgate Minerals is seeking approval for its Kemess North project, a proposed \$200-million gold-and-copper mine about 450 km northwest of Prince George.

The ability to finance projects hinges on getting a permit, Northgate chairman Terry Lyons says.

"People have to stick to schedules," Lyons says of the approval process.

"I'd rather have a fast 'no' than what I consider to be a perpetual maybe."

Redcorp vice-president Bob Carmichael knows about perpetual maybes. Redcorp got a federal green light for Tulsequah Chief last month -- 11 litigation-filled years after it started the approval process.

Mining companies expect some groups to reject all development, even environmentally benign development, Carmichael says.

"Environmental concerns move beyond accepted challenges when objective science gets overruled by misinformation," Carmichael says.

"The problem comes when government regulators begin to base their decisions less on objective science and more on politics influenced by misinformation campaigns."

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#### POINTS OF CONTENTION

Conflict between the mining industry and environmentalists peaked in 1993 with protests over the proposed Windy Craggy copper-gold mine in northwestern B.C.

The then NDP government enraged the mining community by killing the proposal and turning the mineral-rich area into a park.

Among the current mine proposals that have stirred opposition:

- Vancouver-based Redcorp Ventures' proposed reopening of the Tulsequah Chief zinc-copper-gold-silver mine 100 kilometres south of Atlin. The underground project has been fought by the Transboundary Watershed Alliance and the Taku River Tlingit First Nation.

- Northgate Minerals' proposed open-pit Kemess North mine north of Prince George. Four First Nations have raised concerns about the company's plan to store mine waste in Duncan Lake.

- Geologist Derek Ford is worried about the ecological impact of Vancouver-based Canadian Zinc Corp.'s proposed zinc mine on the doorstep of Nahanni National Park in the Northwest Territories.

Ran with fact box "POINTS OF CONTENTION", which has been appended to the story.