

Mining firm wants environmental groups to back land swap

By CHRIS KNIGHT, Enterprise Senior Staff Writer

A Willsboro-based mining company is asking Adirondack environmental groups to support a state constitutional amendment that would let the company mine 250 acres of state Forest Preserve land in the town of Lewis in exchange for donating other land to the state.

But environmentalists aren't exactly jumping on board, which has upset some state lawmakers.

NYCO Minerals wants to mine wollastonite from a 250-acre parcel of land in the Jay Mountain Wilderness that is next to the company's current mining operation in Lewis.

Based on geologic studies, NYCO Chairman Jay Moroney said the state-owned parcel has five to nine years' worth of wollastonite that could be mined.

"The ore quality there is excellent and could provide an extension of life to our operation," Moroney said. "It would also allow us an opportunity to generate some money so that additional exploration on non-state lands could take place."

NYCO, which has been in business in Essex County since 1952, has been talking to state Department of Environmental Conservation officials and environmental groups about mining the state-owned parcel since the early 1980s. Two prior attempts at a constitutional amendment never moved forward for various reasons. The most recent effort was launched about two-and-a-half years ago, Moroney said.

"We began a dialogue with the environmental community once again to see what we would have to do to gain access to that site," he said.

Under the "conceptual" land swap pitched to the Adirondack Council, the Adirondack Mountain Club and Protect the Adirondacks!, Moroney said NYCO would acquire yet-to-be identified lands of "environmental importance" that could be added to the Forest Preserve in return for the groups' support for a state constitutional amendment.

But some environmentalists are raising concerns about the land swap.

David Gibson, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks!, said his group asked for a clear and detailed proposal but only got a "fairly vague" concept.

"What we saw was a concept that we weren't ready to accept," he said. "We didn't feel mining underneath a wilderness area for minerals that might last much less than a decade was the kind of proposal we thought would command a popular vote of support (to amend the state Constitution)."

Gibson said his group understands that NYCO, which employs about 100 people, is important to the economy of Willsboro and Essex County. But he also said NYCO has existing reserves and won't go out of business if the proposal isn't approved.

"It didn't appear to us to be an imminent emergency required by the company to stay in business," he said.

If NYCO is able to advance a constitutional amendment through the Legislature, Gibson said his group would be willing to take another look at it.

The Adirondack Council is concerned about the precedent the move would set but hasn't made a final decision, according to spokesman John Sheehan.

"There has never been a proposal to swap land to a mining company from the Forest Preserve before, and the public might not think that's a good idea," Sheehan said. "It's going to take some persuading to get us around to the idea that this is something we ought to support."

The response to the proposal from the environmental community has angered state Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward, a former Willsboro supervisor who's been working with NYCO on the land swap.

She said the environmental groups should stay at the table until a more formal proposal is unveiled.

"They just up and say unilaterally, 'No,' and they don't even know what the proposal may be," Sayward said. "If we can't keep them at the table, how are we going to be able to help the economic issues that are hurting us here in the Adirondacks."

The support of environmentalists is seen as key to advancing the amendment. Sayward doesn't think it can happen without them.

"I think the chances would be greatly diminished," she said.

A state constitutional amendment needs to be approved by two separately elected Legislatures and voters across the state in a general election, a process that can take several years.

Most successful amendments to Article 14, the so-called "forever wild" clause of the state Constitution, are projects that have had a substantial public benefit, like the extension of an electric transmission line into Tupper Lake, which was approved by the voters last month, and the building of the Adirondack Northway.

Moroney said his company's proposed land swap has an important public benefit that voters across the state would understand.

"The biggest benefit would be maintaining employment in the area, plus the economic multiplier effect NYCO provides to the local area," Moroney said. "We'd also be adding more acreage to the state's control in the Park. That's the public benefit."

Environmental groups are scheduled to meet later this month to discuss whether they'll support the proposal. Moroney said he understands some of their concerns but hasn't heard a definitive "no" yet.

"We're sitting here waiting for their response," he said.

DEC spokeswoman Maureen Wren said her agency doesn't have any specifics at this point on NYCO's proposed land swap.

"Because it's early in the process, we haven't weighed in on it, and we'll continue to monitor it as it progresses," Wren said.

Wollastonite, the mineral NYCO is taking from the existing Lewis mine, is used in a wide range of products such as plastics, ceramics, brake pads, paint, coatings and sealants. The only other commercial wollastonite mine in the country is in the Gouverneur area.

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