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Arizona Copper Mine Stirs Debate Pitting Profits vs. Religion

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SUPERIOR, Ariz. (AP) — Outside of an aging mining town in the mountains east of Phoenix, a copper company has burrowed a shaft 1.3 miles into the high desert landscape in what is believed to be the deepest such mine in the U.S.



Resolution Copper Mining says the mine will usher in a new era of prosperity for Arizona, bringing in the equivalent of roughly a \$1 billion worth of revenue annually for about 60 years in a state still trying to emerge from the housing bust.

The mine also will use approximately 18,000 acre feet of water annually, enough to supply about 40,000 homes. And it will claim nearly 5-square miles on the edge of nearby Superior to store mining waste that can be toxic.

The plan has angered conservationists, residents, and Native American tribes who argue the mine will cause irreparable harm to land coveted for its beauty, biodiversity, and sanctity.

Tribes say the project could destroy part of a historic ridge where dozens of Apache warriors leapt to their deaths to avoid surrendering to U.S. Cavalry during western expansion.

The company, business leaders and Republican members of Congress believe they have addressed environmental and tribal concerns while protecting the environment and holy Native American locations.

Copper is one of Arizona's most abundant resources and remains a vital part of the state's economy. The Arizona Mining Association estimated that if Arizona were a country, it would be the ninth-biggest copper producer in the world.

But mining that mineral wealth creates the risk of pollution and a vicious boom-and-bust cycle that the Sierra Club says has resulted in more than 100,000 abandoned mine shafts around the state.

A study by Arizona-based Elliot D. Pollack and Company found that Resolution Copper Mine could produce as much as \$64.1 billion in economic value over the estimated 60-year mine life, about a third of which will go to local, state, and federal tax revenues.



Project director Andrew Taplin said the mine will create as many as 1,400 mining jobs and 2,300 contracting positions.

"The economic epicenter will be right here in the town of Superior and spread its way out through the state," Taplin said.

The 1.7 billion-ton copper ore deposit sits deep underneath an area called Oak Flats, which the San Carlos Apache tribe believes is the origin of all life on earth.

In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower protected the Oak Flats campground from future mining activity and reserved the location for recreation including camping, hiking, birding, and rock climbing. Conservationists covet Oak Flats and the nearby Devil's Canyon as a unique habitat home to an endangered type of cactus and the headwaters of a creek.

The company plans to tap into the ore using block-cave mining, a technique that involves digging underneath the ore body and setting off explosions to break apart the ore. As miners remove the ore, the land on top is expected to fracture and collapse, creating a two-mile wide, 1,000-foot-deep crater that could swallow the Oak Flats campground and destroy part of the Apache Leap Ridge.

To obtain the land, Resolution Copper enlisted the help of Congress, namely Sen. John McCain. McCain attached a provision into a defense bill in December that transferred 2,400 acres of federal land to Resolution Copper in exchange for 5,300 acres of land owned by the company.

McCain heralded the bill as a compromise that protects 800 acres of sacred land along Apache Leap, allows access to Oak Flats campgrounds and requires the mine to undergo an Environmental Impact Statement before it receives the land. Access to the campground is contingent on the sinking ground being able to safely hold campers.

Critics say the mine's economic projections are overstated.

The San Carlos Apache Tribe enlisted its own economics consultant, Dr. Thomas Power from the University of Montana, who concluded that Pollack's study ignored volatility in copper's price and other key numbers. Power's study said the mine would bring in fewer than 900 jobs and \$300,000 in tax revenues.

Opponents also point to the foreign owners of Resolution Copper Mining, a subsidiary of British-Australian Rio Tinto and Australian BHP Billiton, saying it's unclear how much of the profits and the copper will stay in the U.S. They also point out the political influence of the corporation—McCain received \$10,000 from Rio Tinto this election cycle.

Roy Chavez, a retired miner and former mayor of Superior, has watched the boom-and-bust cycle of the mining town for decades. He watched the old Magma Mine lay off 1,200 workers in one day in 1982, open again in 1989 with less than 400 workers, then close again in 1996. The town was never the same after 1982, he said.



Today, the town's main street remains a row of boarded up, abandoned buildings. "When you talk to some of the people here they will say they need the mine because of the future it promises," Chavez said. "But the reason these towns suffer is because of the mining industry."

Apaches marched to the Oak Flats campground and have been occupying the location since February. They are planning to head to Washington in July to protest the land transfer coinciding with a bill by Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz, recently introduced to repeal the land transfer.

Wendsler Nosie Sr., councilman and former chairman of the San Carlos Apache tribe, said the land transfer is yet another chapter in the history of Manifest Destiny.

"To me, this is the spiritual war. Because we are fighting something that is old. Because they want to continue to take from the earth and leave nothing behind," Nosie said.

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1. What natural resource is being discussed in this article?
2. What are some of the uses of this natural resource? Spend time discussing this information with your class and record your ideas below.
3. Brainstorm some of the pros and cons for mining in this particular location. Get with a partner and share your ideas.

Pros	Cons

4. Use the pros and cons to construct an argument for or against mining in Arizona.