

Toxic mine water in Nevada County to be treated in proposed massive Newmont project

Keri Brenner, Grass Valley Union, 4-4-15

After 10 years, a 182-acre project to collect and treat toxic wastewater from several abandoned gold mines in the Grass Valley area is finally in the works.

But despite the fact that the so-called “North Star Water Treatment Facility” is expected to clean up manganese, iron and arsenic-tainted water before it dumps into Wolf Creek — as it is doing now — some neighbors along Allison Ranch Road where Newmont Mining Corp. wants to build two 2-plus acres of water treatment ponds are not happy.

“We couldn’t agree more that the (North Star and Massachusetts Hill) mines’ toxic wastewater should be cleaned up,” said 11-year resident Zora Biagini. “We just don’t think it should be at our expense, environmentally or financially.”

Newmont spokesman Omar Jabara said Friday that the company worked for years to accommodate all the agencies and regulations in designing and siting the project. The company’s staff last month met with neighbors to explain the project application, filed Dec. 31 with Nevada County. A public hearing before the county’s Planning Commission is expected this summer.

Nonetheless, Biagini said she has many unanswered questions. Chiefly, Biagini said she doesn’t understand why Newmont could not find another, more remote place for the ponds elsewhere on the 740 acres the firm owns in the area. On March 28 she sent a letter with her questions and grievances to Nevada County Senior Planner Tod Herman, who is processing Newmont’s land use application.

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Jabara, in response, said Newmont “worked closely with city and state officials over the past 10 years to identify a viable location for the water treatment plant. Siting of the plant has been modified several times to accommodate various requirements from the city, state and others.

“The current design was proposed to the Nevada County Planning Commission based on various physical, construction and regulatory constraints,” Jabara added. “Considerations were taken to site the facilities in locations which may be able to provide aesthetic screening. As discussed with residents during a recent field tour, we are open to suggestions that could provide further screening.”

Herman, meanwhile, said the North Star Water Treatment Facility, as the county is calling the project, spans seven assessors’ parcels totaling 182 acres. Herman said the public will have ample opportunity for comment when the project comes before the Planning Commission.

He said he does not anticipate having to do a full environmental impact report.

“We will likely be processing the application with a mitigated negative declaration,” Herman said.

He has set up a webpage at the county website on the project, posting numerous documents. To access the

webpage, go to www.mynevadacounty.com, “departments,” “planning department,” and click on “North Star Water Treatment Facility.”

When completed, the North Star Water Treatment Facility will collect, divert and treat iron, manganese and arsenic-tainted water from the former North Star Mine that is currently draining directly into Wolf Creek. It will also take in similarly toxic water from the former Massachusetts Hill Mine’s Drew Tunnel that is currently being treated at a temporary green sand pond at the Grass Valley sewage treatment plant, according to project consultant Sherm Worthington, of Worthington Miller Environmental LLC of Fort Collins, Colo.

Worthington said Newmont and the city of Grass Valley in September reached a settlement on a deal in which Newmont will purchase a small portion of the city’s land to build a pumping station to pump the water out of Drew Tunnel. The water from the Drew Tunnel, combined with the North Star mine drainage water, will be taken by pipeline to a 2-acre lined sedimentation pond, where the solids will settle out.

Then the water will go to a 2.5-acre lined vegetative wetland pond, designed for passive water treatment. After that, the water will filter through toxic limestone beds, before being released into Wolf Creek under a federal water discharge permit.

Except for the city’s small portion of land near the Drew Tunnel, the rest of the project is located in unincorporated Nevada County.

Biagini said she appreciates the likely improvement in water quality in Wolf Creek and in area groundwater. However, she said she just doesn’t want the facility in her backyard — or the backyards of her neighbors.

“It’s easy to take care of the toxic water and get rid of it,” she said last week in an interview. “Just do it on your own property, out of sight, so no one has to look at it when we’re driving down the road.”

Biagini, a long-time professional in the real estate and mortgage business, said she thinks the ponds will have to be included in disclosure statements with any new real estate transactions. She said she believes the statements could trigger a substantial loss in property values.

“Of course you can’t leave toxic water draining out along Allison Ranch Road into Wolf Creek,” she said. “However, it should have been done a long time ago, and it should have been done at their expense.”

Jabara said the water treatment ponds should not have a negative effect on the neighborhood.

“Open ponds are being used to allow for appropriate water storage and to provide the necessary retention times for proper treatment,” he said. “Odors are not expected to be generated by these ponds, as is the case with the city’s sewage treatment plant.

“Water staged in and passing through these ponds will be continuously moving, thereby avoiding stagnant water conditions,” he added. “The ponds will not contain sewage components.”

Biagini also said that she was not notified when representatives from Newmont, project contractor Charlie Faber of Nevada City and Worthington Miller met last month with several groups of residents to explain the project, because she lives outside of the 500-foot notification radius set by Nevada County. A neighbor sent her the invitation, however, so she was able to attend.

In her March 28 letter, Biagini asked Herman to expand the notification boundaries. Herman said he

would do so, but not by the 1-mile or 5-mile radius requested by Biagini.

Herman said there were 151 property owners on the current notification list, and “if we expand this list, it would most likely include more properties further south along Allison Ranch Road, but not out to a 1-mile or 5-mile radius.” Newmont is under a 2014 order from the California Regional Water Quality Board, Central Valley Region, to clean up the toxic mine water before it gets into Wolf Creek. According to the 2014 order, a copy of which is available at the Nevada County webpage, the water quality board has been investigating and issuing orders regarding the North Star mine drainage since 2008.

Worthington said he was involved even prior to that, starting in 2004, when he was enlisted to work on the Drew Tunnel drainage.

Biagini said she is not reassured by the extensive work that has gone into the so-called “passive” water treatment facility. She questions the credibility of Newmont, which has been cited for numerous environmental violations at other locations around the world. In February, Newmont agreed to a \$15 million settlement with California State Parks over the cost of toxic waste cleanup from the former Empire Mine in Grass Valley.

Jabara said the project will be subject to “rigorous” state, county and city regulations and oversight.

“Mining operations have ceased for decades and risks around spills from mining activities is not applicable,” he said. “Our commitment to complete construction of the water treatment plant is a necessary part of fulfilling our agreement with the city.”

Still, Biagini questions the location of the project, starting just behind the Mining Museum interchange that fronts the Grass Valley Sewage Treatment Plant, calling it the “heart of Grass Valley.”

“The North Star Mine property is located along Allison Ranch Road near the end of downtown Grass Valley’s Mill Street,” Biagini said.

“It is surrounded by major shopping centers, the Nevada County Fairgrounds, Brighton Greens Business Park and the Allison Ranch Road residential community,” she added. “It is also at the Highway 20 and Highway 49 interchanges to these areas.

“All of these areas will be negatively affected, both environmentally and financially,” she said. “There is nothing ‘passive’ about this project.”