

Make Eagle Mountain part of Joshua Tree Park

Palm Springs Desert Sun, 1-10-15

The settlement of a longstanding legal fight over land around the Eagle Mountain iron mine has many hoping the mine site is moving closer to inclusion in Joshua Tree National Park.

Count us among that number.

Nothing about the recent legal settlements between Kaiser Eagle Mountain, which owns the mine, and those who challenged a land swap between Kaiser and the federal government 15 years ago necessarily indicates that the mine and adjacent ghost town are poised to become part of the park.

Kaiser continues its efforts to sell the site to another mining company. And a separate company continues to push its plan to build a hydroelectric power plant using the massive pits dug out over decades in the desert east of Indio.

Regulators, meanwhile, say the recent legal settlement doesn't affect Kaiser's right to mine the lands it holds.

"If the park service is interested in the future in pursuing (absorption of Eagle Mountain), then we'd need to cross that bridge when we get to it," Bureau of Land Management spokeswoman Dana Wilson told The Desert Sun's Sammy Roth.

But within the settlement are hints that our preferred outcome of the site becoming a historic piece of Joshua Tree National Park — where visitors could learn about its mining and steelmaking past — is not so farfetched.

Kaiser spent years in court fighting the land swap challenges from local activist Donna Charpied and the National Parks Conservation Association. It's unclear what prompted Kaiser to agree to the settlement late in 2014.

While it's true that Kaiser's actions are an effort to smooth the way for a possible sale to another firm, the settlement included Kaiser's agreement to let the federal government keep lands it gave up in the 1999 exchange that spurred the lawsuits.

Those lands are seen as critical habitat for at-risk desert species such as the desert tortoise, the flat-tailed horned lizard and the Yuma clapper rail.

We agree with Charpied that the government should move quickly now to protect those areas.

"We just knocked one of the heads off the hydra," Charpied says. "Time to get that land back to the park now. There's no reason not to."

The settlement also might serve as a chess move of sorts blocking Eagle Crest Energy Company's proposed hydroelectric plant at Eagle Mountain.

Eagle Crest has secured a license for the plant from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission even though Kaiser has refused to sell it the land.

The land that Kaiser ceded to the government in the settlement might be vital to the hydroelectric plant

project, so its loss theoretically could scuttle, or at least complicate, Eagle Crest's plan.

Kaiser has been against the power plant plan since it was first floated two decades ago at a time when the mining company was pushing for the site to become a regional "super landfill." That plan, which would have had the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County buy the site and build the landfill, had been endorsed by The Desert Sun due to its promise of 1,300 jobs and \$20 billion of economic activity over 20 years.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the South Coast Air Quality Management District also supported the landfill idea, which finally died in May 2013 when the Los Angeles Sanitation Districts' Board ceased negotiations on the plan.

The hydroelectric plant idea also deserves to die.

Eagle Crest says the facility would require an estimated 28,000 acre-feet pumped from the Chuckwalla Valley aquifer over four years. That's 9 billion gallons, which is enough water to satisfy 40,000 homes a year.

With evaporation, more than 100,000 acre-feet would be needed for the plant over the next 50 years.

Steve Lowe, president of Eagle Crest Energy, has said that's less than 1 percent of what the Chuckwalla Valley aquifer contains. But let's be clear: This commitment would be foolhardy considering that California is suffering its worst drought in a generation, with signs pointing to a future of similar drought-fueled water shortages.

We call on all sides to use this latest milestone as impetus to work toward a deal that makes Eagle Mountain a new piece of Joshua Tree National Park, creating a vibrant tourist attraction celebrating the area's colorful and important mining past and relinking habitat for important desert species.