

Mojave gold mine will leave lasting visual impression

Bakersfield Californian, 4-15-10

Last Thursday, Kern County planners approved a Canadian company's request to extract gold and silver from a mountain in the Kern desert.

That doesn't sound like such a big deal, as Soledad Mountain, about five miles south of Mojave, is among many mining sites in the desert. But dig a little deeper, and you discover that this isn't just another operation that will remain out of sight and out of mind.

Golden Queen Mining Co., of Vancouver, British Columbia, plans to pry huge chunks off the mountain to get to the valuable ore. To separate the precious metals, cyanide will be used in leaching pits, a common procedure in the industry. This has caused worry among the Sierra Club and some residents near the mountain about groundwater contamination, danger to wildlife and loss of property value. They're also worried about the release of chemicals into the air, but the Planning Commission assures that, citing multiple technical studies, it will be a state-of-the-art operation that will affect no one's health, despite some particulate matter emissions that can't be mitigated, said Lorelei Oviatt, acting director.

It's easy to see why the plan was approved. The project, slated to last 31 years, will reportedly create up to 165 permanent jobs and generate some \$27 million in taxes over its lifetime. The mountain has been mined in the past and is estimated hold 893,700 ounces of gold -- worth about \$1 billion in today's dollars -- and 10.1 million ounces of silver. Both metals are used in many industries, such as the manufacture of high-tech electronics.

But the project will also have a permanent effect: It will "substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings."

According to published reports, "Material will be excavated from an open pit and a portion of the mountainside. This will occur in five separate pits on different areas of the mountain."

By law, the site will be rehabilitated when the project winds down. The pits will be filled with the aim of restoring the mountain's shape, and native vegetation will be reintroduced. But Soledad Mountain will never look the same. The evidence of human activity will live forever. What hidden hazards to humans and animals will be left behind?

It's also bad news for one man who owns a movie set near the mountain. His property is used by filmmakers because of its rustic look and proximity to Los Angeles, and the mountain is a key backdrop. It'll lose some appeal.

The mining outfit received a conditional use permit, so all systems are go unless an appeal to the Board of Supervisors is filed within 14 days of the commission's approval.

We understand the project offers some economic benefit, but we can't ignore its likely impact on the Mojave Desert's natural beauty and environmental stability. Invasive methods of mineral extraction often come at a big cost -- bigger, in many cases, than their benefits. This seems like one such case.