



- News
- News
 - Sports
 - Opinion
 - Features
 - Sections
 - Extras
 - Ads
 - CU
 - Services
 - Service Directory
 - Online Documents
 - Ishpeming / Negaunee Map
 - All Access E-Edition

gwynnie bee.
sizes 10-32



JOIN FOR \$10 ▶

« NMU presidential search narr... Three injured in 18-vehicle... »

Eagle Mine groundwater discharge permit mullied

Michigan DEQ holds public hearing on revised document

March 26, 2014
ZACH JAY - Journal Ishpeming Bureau Staff (zjay@miningjournal.net) , Journal Ishpeming Bureau

Save |

ISHPEMING - Officials from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality fielded dozens of questions and heard a litany of comments Tuesday night from about 150 people about the proposed revised groundwater discharge permit for the Eagle Mine.

Almost all who came to the hearing at Westwood High School in Ishpeming Township Tuesday were Marquette County residents who expressed concerns about the impact the mine will have on the Yellow Dog Watershed. Some accused the DEQ of a lack of transparency in the permitting process and of loosening groundwater quality standards to levels preferred by Lundin Mining Corp., the multinational company that purchased the Eagle Mine from Rio Tinto last June.

In a brief presentation before a question-and-answer session, Steve Casey, district supervisor for the DEQ's Water Resources Division in Marquette, attempted to address some of the questions and criticisms raised by the revised permit, including higher limits proposed for groundwater levels of vanadium, chromium and pH, among others.

Article Photos



From right, Steve Casey, district supervisor for the Michi...

The reason for the DEQ's proposed higher levels, Casey said, was to take into account the site's background concentrations - the levels of various metals and minerals already present in groundwater prior to Lundin beginning to treat and discharge water.

According to data from the Superior Watershed Partnership's Community Environmental Monitoring Program, the Eagle Mine exceeded its permits more than 40 times since the original permit was issued in 2007. Casey said that with the exception of a broken well and some other minor issues that have since been corrected, the exceedances were due to levels of metals present in the groundwater before Rio Tinto began site construction.

The fact that the proposed permit does not stipulate the limits of some metals was another point of contention. In the situation where no limit has been established, the permit states that the mine must report to the DEQ any time its levels of discharge are five or more times its "expected effluent" - the estimated discharge of a particular mineral from the mine's water treatment facility - as reported by Lundin.

Casey explained the DEQ's reasoning for not setting limits for certain metals, using aluminum as an example. He said that the groundwater standard for aluminum is 150 micrograms per liter and the expected effluent as reported by Lundin is only about 2 micrograms per liter - making the level at which Lundin would have to notify the DEQ about 10 micrograms per liter.

"If we put a limit of 150 in a permit, when the expected level is 2, in some ways that authorizes the discharge of 150," he said. "And that's why we're hesitant to put limits in when there's no reasonable expectation discharge will ever get close to that level."

"So that's the kind of decision that we have to make, and we do have some latitude to make those decisions and again, we're going to be re-examining those decisions based on what we've been hearing from the public."

Casey said some of the other criticisms have been that the applicable statute for acceptable levels of discharge isn't strict enough.

"Those are the kinds of concerns that we'll listen to and make note of, but realize the DEQ doesn't control the statute or the rules. That's the legislative and the governor's function," he said, urging people to contact their state elected officials.

During the question-and-answer session, handfuls of people asked dozens of questions on a wide variety of topics, including the location of test wells, the timetable for the establishment of the background concentrations in the groundwater, the presence of uranium, the water quality and testing process, and what measures are in place to ensure that if Lundin fails to meet groundwater standards appropriate action will be taken.

Several people, including Alexandra Thebert - executive director of Save the Wild U.P. - also criticized the DEQ's decision to locate the meeting in Ishpeming Township - about a half an hour drive from Marquette and more than an hour from Big Bay, the community most affected by the mine.

"We understand that as the crow flies it's relatively close, but our roads do not currently work that way," Thebert said. "And in fact, this public hearing is even inconvenient to people who live in Ishpeming. It requires a car or other transportation just to get here. So we urge you to reconsider public hearings and make sure that they are accessible."

Thebert and Kathleen Heideman, president of SWUP, had other criticisms of what they said was the DEQ's lack of transparency and failure to notify the public about the hearing according to the department's own standards.

"We at Save the Wild U.P. requested in advance of tonight's hearing several documents that we knew that the DEQ had sent out. Those included a soil review, a surface water review and a hydrogeologic survey, and we were told that those would not be given to us in advance of this hearing," Thebert said. "I'd like to express my disappointment that those documents were not made available. There have been other instances, too, where people have asked to understand the permitting fee structure, (and) they've been told to (request the information using the Freedom of Information Act), which would then postpone the materials being received by the public hearing date."

Thebert also said the DEQ, which sends out routine calendar notifications announcing public hearings, did not include Tuesday's public hearing in its Monday notice.

"It is not responsive to the people that are funding this position. These are state regulators funded by tax dollars, funded by taxpayers, who are asked to regulate an industry for the sake of these communities, and they refuse to be responsive," Thebert said.

She said the DEQ's actions regarding the permit have made it "really difficult for working people that have jobs and kids and other things to do to be engaged and be involved in their communities."

During the public hearing portion of the evening, attendees spent the three minutes allotted them to speak passionately about what they said was a lack of information about the hydrogeologic nature of the area, and their concerns for the future of the Yellow Dog Watershed, the U.P.'s fresh water supply and the boom-and-bust history of mining in the area.

Robert Tammen of Soudan, Minn., who said he worked at the Empire and Tilden mines 40 years ago, spoke about what effects he's seen the mining industry have on the area. He talked about a recent drive through Palmer, where the Empire is located, and National Mine, where the Tilden operates, seeing the school in Palmer closed and the schoolyard overgrown with grass, and a grocery store where he used to shop now abandoned.

"There's no doubt we're doing this balancing economic development with environmental concerns, and I would make the point that in Michigan, as in Minnesota, mining does not have a good record for economic development," he said. "If you assign a value to an ore in the ground as an asset, if you conducted an honest analysis with a balance sheet, you would find that mining is a net liability to the state of Michigan."

Michigamme Township supervisor Alvar Maki spoke in favor of the revised permit, saying that he is glad to see the DEQ has updated the limits of vanadium and other metals to reflect the existing groundwater and that he hopes the permit is approved.

"We feel there has been a good record of environmental protection with the existing permit," he said.

The public comment on the revised permit will be open through Tuesday. The permit, as well as a fact sheet and details about the permit's specific changes, can be viewed at www.michigan.gov/deq/0,4561,7-135-3313_4117-320096-.00.html.

Zach Jay can be reached at 906-486-4401.

Save |

Recommend Be the first of your friends to recommend this.
 0

[Subscribe to Mining Journal](#)

Sponsored From Around the Web

livedeal | **One Tech Stock You Won't Want To Miss** **SEE WHY**