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SWP to provide unbiased monitoring of Eagle Mine

Guest op-eds

January 13, 2013

By Richard Anderson , The Mining Journal

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Residents of Michigan's Upper Peninsula now have an independent source of information to help them judge the environmental impacts of the operations of the Eagle Mine and a window into how the mine owners, Rio Tinto, respond to any problems.

That's unusual. Environmental impacts of mining are typically monitored through mining company self-reporting to state and federal agencies that set environmental standards in permits. Rio Tinto falls under these legal requirements, but it has not been sufficient to earn the trust and confidence of the community-at-large in better understanding what is really going on, or how the environment will really be impacted, or in judging the standard of environmental performance of Rio Tinto in operating Eagle Mine. If something should go wrong, who will be the impartial trusted source of information to monitor how Rio Tinto actually reacted, and what was done to mitigate the impacts?

To step into this void, the Superior Watershed Partnership (SWP) and the Marquette County Community Foundation entered into an agreement with Rio Tinto's Eagle Mine operation to create the "Rio Tinto Eagle Mine Community Environmental Monitoring Program" (CEMP) to build a comprehensive and accurate picture of Eagle Mine's environmental impact. It allows SWP to conduct additional monitoring at its own discretion, and in consultation with community members. To their credit, Rio Tinto helped develop this path-breaking agreement and will provide essential and arms length funding to launch the program. Critics of this agreement worry that it extends an unneeded hand to Rio Tinto and offers up a social license to operate. In reality, the State of Michigan granted operating permission and we simply seized upon an opportunity to raise the bar for monitoring and establishing a credible basis for judging Rio Tinto's accountability over time. Now you-and everyone else in the community--can be the judge.

On the way to creating the CEMP, the negotiating parties agreed on principles that were used in designing CEMP's implementation mechanisms.

Rio Tinto has established a fund administered by the Marquette County Community Foundation to compensate SWP for costs incurred in monitoring. The agreement gives operational control over the monitoring program to SWP, which will coordinate and implement the program working with universities, contractors and EPA approved laboratories. The Foundation has established an independent oversight board to review annual monitoring plans and budgets and when necessary, resolve issues between the parties. For example, Rio Tinto and the SWP may disagree over the scientific standards used in a particular monitoring investigation. In that case, the oversight board would hear the dispute, listen to both sides, even call on outside experts and make a final decision.

Members of the oversight board include: Dr. Nancy Wiseman Seminoff, Chair; Lawrence Carey; Richard Aho; Pam Christensen; and the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Representative remains open. These members bring extensive industry, community and environmental sciences expertise to their volunteer positions in overseeing CEMP.

To learn more background about the process that led to CEMP, see www.cempmonitoring.com/wp-content/themes/cemp/pdfs/RT_CEMP-The-Unity-of-Place.pdf. If you would like to review the agreements, or access all data collected, see www.cempmonitoring.com. If you are interested in making a tax-deductible donation to support the expansion and scope of CEMP, you may send a contribution to the Marquette County Community Foundation "CEMP" Fund. For more information on how to make a donation to support the expansion of CEMP and the related community engagement and outreach process, call 226-7666.

This is ultimately a pioneering effort in how local institutions can collaborate to build the capacity to hold corporations accountable for actions that could impact public and private lands, fresh waters and our environmental assets. The SWP encourages your participation and feedback.

Editor's note: Richard Anderson is chairman of the board of the Superior Watershed Partnership.

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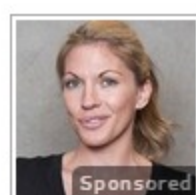
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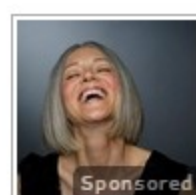
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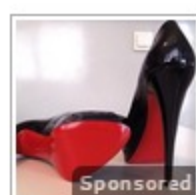
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