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H2O revision

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MARQUETTE - Michigan Department of Environmental Quality officials plan to announce a public hearing soon on a proposed renewal groundwater discharge permit for the Eagle Mine.

Steve Casey, district supervisor for the DEQ's Water Resources Division in Marquette, said the hearing will likely be held in late March. A location is being determined.

"We're looking forward to a public meeting where we can answer some questions and let people know how good this permit really is," Casey said.



The proposed permit -announced in late November - was prepared by DEQ officials after an extensive review of the mine's wastewater treatment system and includes minor revisions reflecting water conditions at the site of the nickel and copper mine.

"As we prepare for (mining) operations in late 2014, we continue to monitor and protect the environment. At the heart of this effort is our water treatment plant, which has been in operation for over two years," said Dan Blondeau, senior advisor of communications and media relations at the Eagle Mine. "The plant ensures that water coming into contact with mining activities is treated before it's recycled into the mining process or discharged to the environment."

Blondeau said the DEQ requires the mine's groundwater discharge permit to be renewed every five years.

DEQ officials previously detailed some local conditions the agency is working to address in the proposed permit. They include:

A 38-day public comment period on the proposed permit opened Dec. 3 and closed Jan. 20.

Michelle Halley, a Marquette attorney who has worked extensively on issues involving the Eagle Mine, recently produced an analysis of the proposed permit for Freshwater Future, a group "supporting the needs of community-based groups and actions working to protect and restore Great Lakes land and water resources."

Halley was critical of the permit in several areas.

Halley said the mine has exceeded limits for arsenic, copper, lead, silver, pH, vanadium and molybdenum and the DEQ has taken no enforcement action. She said in the proposed permit the DEQ is now increasing the limits to the mine's preferred levels.

Halley's analysis also claims the permit limits allow "egregious degradation from baseline water quality," the "scope of monitoring and regulation is insufficient," the "DEQ continues to ignore its statutory duty to regulate surface water discharge" and that "limits on uranium and other constituents must at least match federal limits."

Casey said the DEQ will respond to Halley's comments "completely" as part of the public comment process. The agency will also respond to concerns raised by others who have submitted comments on the permit.

Casey said the proposed permit is protecting health and the environment.

Blondeau said since the original groundwater permit was issued for the mine, the company has collected additional groundwater data.

"The permit levels were adjusted to align with the natural conditions of the water reflected in the data. This does not change the quality of Eagle's treated water," Blondeau said. "Eagle's water treatment plant has had exceptional performance and continues to treat water to better than drinking water quality standards."

Blondeau said the mine tests treated water to ensure it meets permit requirements before it is recycled back into the mining process or discharged to the environment.

"In the event the water does not meet permit requirements we would stop discharging water until the system is adjusted," Blondeau said. "In addition to our extensive water monitoring program, the Superior Watershed Partnership independently validates Eagle's performance as part of the Community Environmental Monitoring Program."

Blondeau encouraged anyone interested in the mine's operations to take a public tour of the facility when tours are again offered next summer.

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