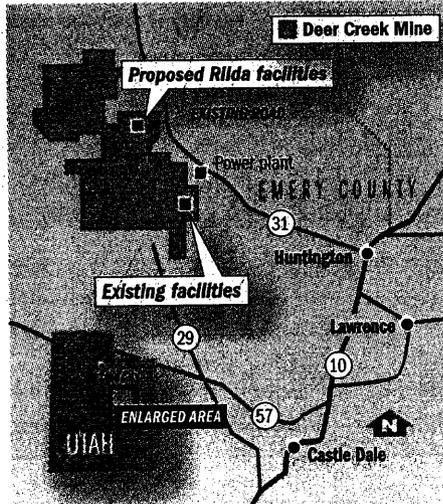


New mine portal proposed



Entry would shorten travel for Emery miners

By Donna Kemp Spangler
Deseret Morning News

Coal miners in Emery County are facing a 12-mile commute. And that's after they get to work.

In the canyons above Huntington, the coal-mining tunnels that worm their way into the rich coal deposits have expanded to the point that the tunneled area is now about the size of Salt Lake City. And miners find themselves riding as

far as 12 miles underground to start their work day.

So Energy West, a subsidiary of PacifiCorp and operator of Deer Creek Mine, wants to build a portal in nearby Rilda Canyon that would provide an entry to shorten the commute inside the mine.

"This would help reduce the travel underground," said Mary Ann Wright, associate director of mining for the Utah Division of Oil, Gas, and Mining (UDOGM), the agency overseeing the project, delegated by the Interior Department's Office of Surface Mining (OSM).

"It will take about five miles off underground trip time," added PacifiCorp spokesman Dave Eskelsen.

The portal, used only for mine entrance, would consist of a 10-acre concrete pad to allow for parking and a shower facility for the 225 miners working different shifts throughout the day. From there, workers would travel underground by small diesel trucks to load the coal onto a conveyor that takes it to the other end at the Deer Creek portal. There, it is loaded onto trucks and sent primarily to PacifiCorp's Huntington Power Plant.

Company officials say the portal is necessary, not only for worker safety but in order to extend the life of the mine for another 15 years. The mine produces about 4 million tons of

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coal annually, which is used to produce electricity at Carbon, Hunter, and Huntington power plants.

"The reserves available in the Deer Creek mining lease are approaching an end," Eskelsen said. The company acquired additional coal leases in nearby Mill Fork, allowing the company to access the coal from a different direction.

"It's an opportunity for the company to construct an access portal to better reach active mining areas," Eskelsen said. "The development of the Mill Fork lease is essential to keeping the power plant running."

But environmentalists are wary of the project, which is in the early stages of environmental analysis.

"The historical evidence is that these two lead agencies, OSM and UDOGM, are so closely tied to the oil and gas industry it's impossible for them to be objective about it," said Stephanie Tidwell, executive director of Utah Environmental Congress. "We're beginning to see in the Rocky Mountain West an explosion of oil, gas, and mining, a push by the Bush administration, and

nobody is addressing the cumulative impacts."

Wright said a highly qualified team of scientists will conduct the environmental analysis.

Constructing a portal means having to divert 1200 feet of Rilda Creek into a divert, which potentially could disturb the "macro-invertebrates," tiny bugs that fish eat, at the headwaters of the creek. The facility also may impact the nesting cycles of the raptors that occupy the area, an issue that Wright said should be examined.

The project is a multi-agency effort that includes the Forest Service because the proposal is located within the Manti La-Sal National Forest. The Bureau of Land Management controls the mineral rights on federal lands.

Yet Tidwell fears the scientists most intimately familiar with endangered species and other wildlife at the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources would be left out of the loop. State regulators say there are plans to bring them in as consultants.

"Their expertise will be brought to the table," said Jim Kohler, minerals chief for the BLM's Utah Office. "There are various alternatives being

looked at as part of the environmental process."

Wright agreed.

The springs that flow into Rilda Canyon already are being siphoned off as drinking water for people living in Emery County. Historic mines in the canyon have been reclaimed. And, the area is identified in the Manti La-Sal's forest plan as appropriate for mineral development, Kohler said. "A lot of land has previously been disturbed."

Eskelsen agreed. He said that 40 percent of the lands that would be impacted have already been disturbed by previous mining. After the company completes the mining operations, the earth would be restored to better than pre-mining conditions.

"We'll have a full restoration plan that will be agreed to before we start this," he said. "When we are finished there the company will have completely restored the area."

Tidwell isn't convinced. "To have the permitting agencies in charge of environmental analysis is an obvious conflict of interest," she said. "Frankly, we don't believe they are qualified enough and we don't feel comfortable with them analyzing the impacts."

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