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Plans for Gypsum Mines on San Rafael Trigger Swell of Environmental Protest

BY JIM WOOLF

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Wilderness advocates are complaining about two gypsum mines proposed for the San Rafael Swell in southeastern Utah.

United States Gypsum of Sigurd, and Western Clay Co. of Aurora want to develop mining claims on federal land on the western flank of the swell, south of Interstate 70.

Both mines would be outside officially designated "wilderness study areas," and in areas declared open for this type of activity by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

But the mines would be on lands proposed for wilderness designation by a coalition of citizen groups known as the Utah Wilderness Coalition, and they want the area protected.

"These mines are a direct threat to Utah wilderness," said Dave Pacheco, Moab representative for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

The coalition's wilderness recommendation has no legal authority, but Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt in 1993 directed the BLM to give "careful attention" to any activity that could damage the wilderness characteristics of lands recommended by environmentalists.

Neal Mortensen, an owner of Western Clay, said he had "no idea" his mining claims were in an area recommended for wilderness until this dispute arose.

"I wonder if they just dreamed that up," he said.

Public comment on the environmental assessment prepared by the BLM on United States Gypsum's proposal will be accepted until April 25. The environmental assessment on Western Clay's mine is expected to be released later this spring.

Penny Dunn, assistant manager for the BLM's Price River-San Rafael Resource Area, said the 1872 Mining Act gives these companies the right to proceed as long as they comply with all appropriate rules. The environmental assessments help the BLM and the companies develop mine plans that minimize the impact on surrounding federal land.

The San Rafael Swell is a vast geologic formation created when underground salt deposits caused the ground to swell. As the dome of uplifted rock eroded away, it left scenic sandstone cliffs and canyons along the edges.

The BLM recommended only a portion of this land for wilderness study, leaving the rest open to multiple uses such as mining.

Environmentalists believe a much larger area should have been considered for wilderness.

The United States Gypsum facility in Sigurd is one of 47 plants in the nation that manufactures "Sheetrock" — the company's trademark name for gypsum wall board. The Utah plant employs about 100 people and is planning to expand. That means there

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55,000 acres, said a BLM spokesman. Agency experts first used an airplane to spray the entire area with a mixture of seeds, and then wanted to churn up the soil by knocking over the trees. They contended this was the only way to mix the seeds into the soil and ensure revegetation of the land.

Mining Plans Spark a Swell Of Concern

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will be a need for more gypsum, said Matt Gonring, vice president for corporation communications.

The company's plan is to open a new quarry near Interstate 70 in an area known as Devil's Canyon — about 40 miles east of Salina.

Western Clay's 20 employees produce "industrial and agricultural minerals" for a wide variety of uses.

Gypsum is sold to farmers in California who add it to irrigation water to make their soil more permeable.

Western Clay already has a 5-acre quarry near Hebe Mountain just west of the San Rafael Swell and several miles south of Interstate 70.

It wants to expand this quarry to 80 acres, taking in land recommended for wilderness by environmental groups.

"The San Rafael Swell has the highest purity gypsum in the United States," said Mortensen. "It is a unique deposit out there."