

Apaches will defy mine that threatens sacred lands

My Turn: Arizona Republic

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Kathy W. Kitcheyan, Chairwoman of the San Carlos Apache

Editor's note: The following is in response to the Thursday editorial "Firm hand needed to guide mining deal," which supported efforts in Congress to effect a complex land exchange to enable the Resolution Copper Co. to begin site preparation for a huge underground copper mine near Superior.



Our position is simple and straightforward. For the Apaches, this area, which includes Oak Flat campground and Apache Leap, belongs to the Gaan, who are our sacred Crowndancers.

Since time immemorial, we have found refuge there and gathered precious medicinal herbs and traditional food there.

Our goal is to protect these sites from potential ruin. Once they are lost, they can never be regained. Our people will not sacrifice our ancestors' legacy and our children's future for the political expediency of moving legislation forward that does not protect these sites.

The Republic's editorial stated that tribal concerns have been "satisfactorily addressed." However, this is simply not true. The fact is that SB 2466 does not contain provisions that adequately protect our sacred sites.

For example, the Oak Flat Campground will be closed after two years due to safety concerns associated with the mining process.

Also, while the conservation easement accommodates the town of Superior's concerns over its scenic view, as well as the rock-climbing communities' concern over its continued recreational enjoyment in that area, it does not address the Apache people's cultural, religious and historical concerns.

When Resolution Copper Co. was putting together this land exchange package over the past few years, it reached out to many groups to discuss the legislation but it never approached the San Carlos Apache Tribal Council.

Resolution Copper never once sat down with the council to discuss the land exchange, and instead, chose to rely on the U.S. Forest Service's representations of the tribe's views.

We are now in the process of trying to learn as much as possible about the potential impacts of the proposed mining on this land, including the environmental effects and the impact on our sacred sites. Resolution Copper is still trying to determine the extent of the impact of operations on the site.

Resolution Copper has indicated it is not sure what the extent of the "crinkling" on the surface would be from the mining but that it would be at least a mile in diameter.

Also, we understand that it is still trying to determine what the impact of the mining would have on the water table below the surface.

In order to bypass objections to these impacts, we understand that Resolution Copper is pushing for the land exchange to be exempt from the National Environmental Policy Act. If this occurs, then the environmental impacts will not have to be assessed on the project.

The Apaches will not, under any condition, allow our ancestral lands to be compromised. No society would allow for the religious desecration of their sacred sites and neither will the Apache.

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