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TOP STORY

Canadian mining company withdraws land-lease application for gold exploration along Chena Hot Springs Road

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A Canadian mining exploration company that had applied for a lease on 680 acres of land off Chena Hot Springs Road to explore for gold has withdrawn its application, according to the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority.

Many residents of Esro and Amanita roads, Miles 4 and 5.8 of the road respectively, learned about Avidian Gold Alaska's lease proposal early this week, days before the public comment period was due to expire. Avidian has spent the past two seasons exploring the site for gold, and early indications are promising, according to company President Steve Roebuck.

"The Amanita project is, and will remain, a core asset of Avidian Gold's portfolio of advanced-stage Alaskan gold projects," Roebuck said. "We have been active in the state for the past six years, and during this time the company has always followed best practices in conducting its exploration programs. We have engaged local consultants to ensure the application process is followed correctly and we are both surprised and disappointed by the response to our MHT application. Regardless, we respect the community and as good neighbors we are withdrawing from the process. Avidian will continue to focus on exploring the existing Amanita Property."

Avidian's Amanita claims cover about 3,500 acres, not including the Mental Health Trust parcels.

Avidian's withdrawal of the lease application caused the Mental Health Trust to rescind the best interest decision it released in December in favor of the mining lease. At the same time, the trust closed the public comment period, which was due to expire at 4:30 p.m. Monday, saying it was "considered moot because there is not an applicable decision at this time."

While some residents expressed relief at the denial, others noted that exploration has not been taken off the table completely. They are still concerned about the effects a mine adjacent to their

neighborhood will have on air quality, the local aquifer and their quality of life.

Darla Theisen, who lives on a small road off Amanita, said she has been tracking Avidian's exploration plans since last April and has tried to notify the Mental Health Trust of flaws in their original record of decision. She said she's upset in large part because no one notified residents of the potential for development.

"If we hadn't seen the notice in the paper, we wouldn't have known anything," she said. "No one told us."

Wyn Menefee, executive director of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Land Office, said they use a standard process when notifying the public about decisions.

"The TLO uses both the state's Online Public Notice website and publishes notice in the local paper to inform the public about potential decisions and the opportunity to comment," Menefee said. "The Fairbanks North Star Borough and Doyon Ltd. also received a copy of the notice."

Residents noted that the lease proposal didn't mention the parcel's proximity to homes on Esro and Amanita roads. In a section titled "Adjacent Land Use Trends," it states: "Adjacent land use trends are almost exclusively mineral exploration and development and public recreation."

Menefee said the Trust Land Office uses public records to evaluate proposed projects on trust lands before writing a best interest decision on activities on those lands.

"Many times the Trust visits a parcel before the decision is made, but that is not always the case," he said. "The public comment period provides the public an opportunity to comment on the decision. The TLO then reviews and considers the public comments on the specific decision or proposal before affirming, modifying, or denying the best interest decision."

Since Avidian has withdrawn its application, there is no longer a decision under consideration and the public notice period is closed, he said.

If Avidian submits another lease request, the process starts over, Menefee said.

"Any future proposed action on Trust lands, that we determine to be in the best interest of the Trust, will require a new best interest decision that includes an opportunity for public comments to

be submitted and considered by the TLO,” he said.

Theisen said she and about 20 of her neighbors tried to post comments to the Trust about Avidian’s 2020 exploration plans and “they just blew us all off.”

She said a mine would not be a suitable use of land in that area and would conflict with the adjacent Audubon Riedel Nature Reserve, located between Esro and Amanita roads.

The original 160 acres of the reserve were gifted to the Arctic Audubon Society in the 1980s by the Riedel family with the stipulation that it not be developed other than nonmotorized trails. Eighty acres was added to expand it to 240 acres in 2019, said Gail Mayo, a member of the Arctic Audubon board of directors.

“It’s one of the chief values for the area,” Mayo said.

It’s one of very few remaining undeveloped hillside areas that are ideal wildlife habitats, she said. Most other open spaces are in lowlands. The original plan was to build a nature center on the reserve, but that hasn’t panned out yet. Mayo said a mine would likely bring noise, downslope erosion and light pollution, which would reduce its value as a wildland preserve.

“It’s 240 acres, and for a nature reserve that’s actually kind of small,” she said. “It is subject to whatever might happen around it.”

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Amanita location
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