

Oak Flat Factsheet

Background

Much of Oak Flat was protected from mining by Presidential order in 1955. Oak Flat is 60 miles east of Phoenix, Arizona, within the Tonto National Forest. Oak Flat is bounded on the east and south by Ga'an Canyon (known on most maps as Devil's Canyon). Ga'an Canyon empties into the Gila River and creates a natural travel corridor for wildlife coming from the south and traveling north. To the west is the Apache Leap escarpment, which is the historical site where Apache warriors leapt to their deaths to avoid capture by the US military. To the north, Oak Flat is bounded by Queen Creek Canyon. Oak Flat is also the headwater for Queen Creek, which empties into the Gila River in Phoenix. The toxic tailing dump location is proposed in the Gils River watershed. Because of the religious importance of these areas to Native Americans, the local ecosystem has long been nurtured, as the spiritual wellbeing of Western Apache Tribes is dependent upon fully functioning ecosystems.

Oak Flat has been forever sacred by Native Americans and local residents alike. It had long been a recreational haven because of Oak Flat Campground and the incredible number (at least 2,500) documented rock climbing routes. The recreational community is sensitive to the ecological and sacred nature of the watershed. Protecting Oak Flat bolsters and maintains a sustainable local economy.

Fifteen years ago, two huge international mining companies, Rio Tinto and BHP-Billiton formed a subsidiary called Resolution Copper and began pushing a plan to build a huge, destructive underground mine under Oak Flat. The proposed mine would cause the collapse of almost 2 square miles of the surface at least 1,000 feet deep. The disruption of the water table, beginning long before the eventual collapse of the surface, would be profound.

Land Exchange Law

Since 2005, 12 versions of Rio Tinto's land exchange legislation were introduced. Citizen opposition stopped all 12 attempts from becoming law. However, in December of 2014, the US Congress passed the Oak Flat land exchange after our Arizona US Senators attached the land exchange as a rider to a must-pass defense bill called the National Defense Authorization Act of 2015. One saving grace in the new law says that Oak Flat will remain public land until 60 days after the publication of a Final Environmental Impact Statement.

The Land Exchange Law:

- Is the first United States law that gives a Native American sacred site on public land to foreign mining companies.
- Is the largest loss of public land recreational climbing opportunities in US history.
- Benefits only two huge foreign mining companies at the expense of religious freedoms, Arizona's clean water, the environment, recreation, and economy.

In 2015, 2017, and again in 2019 bills were introduced in the US Congress that would repeal the section of the defense bill (Section 3003) that would give Oak Flat to Rio Tinto and BHP. In January of 2019, Representative Raul Grijalva introduced the “Save Oak Flat Act” (H.R. 665) in the US House of Representatives and Senator Bernie Sanders introduced the Senate Version, (S. 173), to repeal the land exchange. If the Save Oak Flat Act becomes law, Oak Flat would remain public land off limits to mining and the public permitting process would halt.

Mine Plan

Rio Tinto’s mining plan contemplates the development of:

- A massive block cave mine at Oak Flat, to mine copper and molybdenum that would cause a 2-mile-wide, 1,000-foot-deep sink hole to form.
 - The ore body for this mine is a mile underground.
- A mine processing plant west of Superior outside the town boundary.
- A toxic tailing dump in one of four locations within the Gila River Watershed. The mining companies plan to dump 1.3 billion tons of toxic waste on the ground without a liner. All tailing dump alternatives would be illegal in one or more foreign countries.
- A loading facility west of Florence Junction that would load the partially process copper onto rail cars to be transported to seaports for export overseas for final processing.
- 30 water wells in the MARCO railroad corridor close to the town of Magma that would suck the water table dry in the middle of a planned community for over 1 million people.
- The use of more than 590,000 acre-feet of water, more than the city of Tempe, Arizona uses.

Permitting Process

The US Forest Service, began the Federal permitting process in March of 2016. The first part of the process was a public comment (scoping) period. 133,000 comments were sent to the Forest Service during this scoping period, At least 120,000 of these comments opposed the mine

The Forest Service released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on August 9, 2019, that is supposed to sturdy all the impact of the mining plan. Because the release of the DEIS was rushed, the document is incomplete and does not fully analyze the project and its inevitable damage to our communities and the environment.

The Forest Service has identified a new toxic tailings dump location east of Oak Flat that would impact the Dripping Springs Wash and communities. This site is a mix of private and State Trust Land. The Skunk Camp tailings location would be accessed by a series of pipeline, powerline, and access road corridors across federal public land managed by the US Forest Service. The DEIS also analyzes the original toxic tailings dump upstream from Queen Valley and two other possible tailings dump locations.

The DEIS comment period closed November 7, 2019. The Forest Service will then analyze these comments and write a Final Environmental Impact Statement. This Final report could be released in 2020.