

Rio Tinto Mind the Gap

Oak Flat is an ecological, sacred, and recreational haven on public land in the Tonto National Forest, in Arizona, an hour east of Phoenix, Arizona. Resolution Copper, wholly owned by the world's two largest mining companies, Rio Tinto and BHP, is proposing a very large underground copper mine that would create immense damage to the surrounding water resources and to a local cultural heritage site.

Water is so scarce in Arizona that there is not enough available to support this proposed project and for local communities and the environment.

The Resolution Copper proposed copper mine would be a very large underground block cave mine. The proposed mine would severely impact 6,475 hectares of federal, state, and private land, and would stretch 60 kilometers from east to west. The toxic tailings dump would bury 2,000 hectares and be contained by a 5 kilometer long 152 meter dam made out of the toxic tailings themselves. If the dam would burst, tailings could flow down the Gila River for more than 160 kilometers.

Rio Tinto would not process the copper ore into a finished product in Arizona. Rio Tinto would sell copper concentrate (partially refined ore) which would be refined in another country (most likely China), because there is not enough smelter capacity in the United States to refine the concentrate.

Destruction of a Sacred Site

Following the Juukan Gorge debacle, Rio Tinto promised it would “never again’ destroy sacred sites. In Arizona, the Resolution Copper mine is set to do precisely that by creating a crater 3,200 meters wide and 300 meters deep at Oak Flat due to surface subsidence right in the middle of a Native American sacred site. In numerous court documents and testimony, Native Americans have stated passionately that they cannot practice their religion unless Oak Flat is intact.ⁱ

Water usage

Resolution Copper would take billions of gallons of water while Arizona is in the middle of the worst drought in 1,200 years that is projected to get even worse. Rio Tinto claims they have plenty of water banked and would not further impact the drought. Rio Tinto claims they will use “the latest technology” and will “actively explore other ways to further reduce our water use.”

In reality, the water Rio Tinto claims to have “banked” is nowhere near the area where they plan to pump groundwater for the proposed mine. In reality the well fields planned for the mine are in the middle of a planned city of more than a million people. In reality, the mine would use at least 50,000 acre feet of water per year for 50 years or the amount of water used by a city of 180,000 people.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

In reality, Rio Tinto's mining plan has not changed in more than a decade and the plan underestimates the proposed mine's water consumption by more than 3

times. Rio Tinto would like us to believe that the proposed Resolution Copper mine can magically use far less water than any other Arizona mine by using the same techniques.^{iv}

Free Prior Informed Consent

Both Rio Tinto^v and BHP^{vi} (owners of Resolution Copper) have pledged to follow international standards for Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC).

Rio Tinto's Human Rights Policy statement says:

We acknowledge and respect the internationally recognized human rights of Indigenous Peoples, including those established under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and there and other land-connected people's relationship to lands, water, culture and cultural heritage, We are committed to demonstrating progress towards, or achievement of, Free, Prior and Informed Consent on affected Indigenous communities across all stages of the asset lifecycle in accordance with the ICMM Indigenous Peoples and Mining Position Statement.

However, the reality is much different. Resolution Copper's approach to FPIC is to bully Tribes and local people into accepting their mine proposal. Especially on the San Carlos Apache Reservation, Resolution Copper and its allies and subcontractors have gone to great lengths to influence the San Carlos Apache Tribal Council including trying to bribe the current Tribal Chairman and to send campaign contribution to Tribal Council members. This attempted bribery became so bad that the San Carlos Apache Tribal Council unanimously passed a measure prohibiting its employees from accepting any contributions – cash, checks or gifts – from Resolution Copper personnel or contractors.^{vii}

In the town of Superior, Resolution Copper and their subcontractors lead a campaign to recall town council members opposed to the project and to install their own pro Resolution Copper Mayor and Council.

Subsidence and other mine flaws

Rio Tinto claimed for many years that their proposed mine at Oak Flat would cause "little to no subsidence." Even after the US Government wrote an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) showing that the proposed mine at Oak Flat would create a subsidence crater nearly 2 miles wide and 1,000 foot deep, Rio Tinto is backtracking again and saying they don't think there will be much subsidence at all. Subsidence is caused when block cave mining is used because the mining methods leaves a void deep underground and gravity then causes the surface to collapse.

According to the US Government's EIS which is based on the Resolution Copper Mine Plan of operations (written by Rio Tinto), this is only many examples of severe technological problems Where Rio Tinto's rhetoric is far different than reality.^{viiiix}

ⁱ <https://azminingreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Juukan-Gorge-and-Oak-Flat-FINAL.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/556e05ade4b0b54303ce3544/t/6470ef67e2f78b310b8f56b1/1685122922028/Dr.+Wells+Report+on+Water+Impacts+from+Resolution+Copper+Mine+%289-28-21%29+%28003%29.pdf>

iii https://azminingreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Arizona_Mining_Reform_Coalition_Report2_FINAL.pdf

iv https://azminingreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Arizona_Mining_Reform_Coalition_Report2_FINAL.pdf

v <https://www.riotinto.com/en/sustainability/human-rights#:~:text=Consistent%20with%20the%20UN%20Declaration,more%20on%20Indigenous%20Peoples%20page.>

vi https://www.bhp.com/-/media/documents/ourapproach/operatingwithintegrity/indigenouspeoples/221110_indigenouspeoplespolicystatement_2022

vii <https://www.kjzz.org/tribal-natural-resources/2025-03-20/san-carlos-apache-chairman-among-those-alleging-bribes-are-dividing-tribe-over-oak-flat>
<https://intercontinentalcry.org/san-carlos-apache-nation-calls-for-removal-of-resolution-copper/>

viii https://azminingreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Arizona_Mining_Reform_Coalition_Report3_FINAL.pdf

ix https://azminingreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Arizona_Mining_Reform_Coalition_Report4_FINAL.pdf

x https://azminingreform.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Arizona_Mining_Reform_Coalition_Report.pdf