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California Gold Rush Community May Reject Bid to Reopen Historic Mine

Grass Valley, CA – On February 15 and 16, residents of a Gold Rush community in the foothills of California’s Sierra Nevada mountains will be lining up for the final time to comment on a junior mining company’s bid to reopen the historic Idaho-Maryland Mine – which was once one of California’s top-producing gold mines.

The applicant, Rise Gold Corp., promises a modern mine that prioritizes safety, but the project has undergone extensive scrutiny because the long-shuttered mine sits less than three miles from downtown Grass Valley, CA and lies directly beneath what is now a long-established residential neighborhood.

After almost four years of preparation – including environmental and economic reports, public hearings, and intense public opposition – the Nevada County Board of Supervisors will be holding a special hearing to make final decisions on the fate of the mine. The five Supervisors will be asked to consider rezoning and variance requests that would be necessary to proceed with the project. They’ll also make a decision about whether to certify the project’s Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

But odds aren’t looking good for Rise Gold. Opposition to the mine has been bipartisan and intense. Last May, the Nevada County Planning Commission voted unanimously to recommend rejection of the project and EIR. The County’s recently-released staff report endorses that recommendation for the Supervisors vote this week.

“Our community was once at the center of the Gold Rush in the late 1800’s,” said Laurie Oberholzer, former Mayor of neighboring Nevada City, CA. “But the biggest mines shut down in the 1950’s, destroying the economy and leaving a legacy of toxic damage that residents are still living with today. We’ve since turned to tourism, technology, and agriculture to rebuild and sustain our economy. Mining is our past. Not our future.”

The question of community support has generated plenty of controversy. Rise initially used a survey, then later tallied Draft EIR comments to claim that a majority of residents supported the mine. Both efforts generated a firestorm of criticism, including assertions that Rise was “[stuffing the ballot box](#)”. Meanwhile MineWatch, a coalition of groups opposing the mine, gathered [over 5,500 petition signatures](#), gained support of [250 businesses](#), and delivered more than 2,500 postcards and emailed letters asking the County to “Just Say No” to the project.

Troubles with the project first emerged when Nevada County’s Draft EIR was released in January 2022. Rise Gold sent mailers to the public saying “The Science is Clear”, claiming The County’s report confirmed that the mine would be safe and responsible. But critics reacted harshly. The draft report was anything but final and did list some significant and unavoidable environmental impacts. Upon review of the 1000+ page report, residents and local government agencies claimed it was riddled with [errors, omissions, and legal flaws](#). Citing deep concerns with technical reports provided to the County by the applicant, government agencies and a coalition of local organizations submitted extensive rebuttals by technical and legal experts.

“Starting with the most fundamental aspects, a good EIR relies upon adequate and reliable data in order for the decision makers to be adequately informed,” stated Ralph Silberstein, President of Community Environmental Advocates Foundation about the Draft EIR. His group echoed a comment from the City of Grass Valley requesting a revision and recirculation of the report, predicting: “We’ll see many more impacts listed as significant and unavoidable.”

Little changed, however, when the Final EIR was released in December 2022. While the community was looking for revisions in key areas like air, water, mine waste disposal, and greenhouse gas emissions, very little was addressed.

After an extended period of public comment, a public hearing about the Final EIR was scheduled in May 2023. The hearing was an exhaustive two day affair that included over 1,000 attendees, 139 public comments, and a remarkably-timed 5.5 magnitude earthquake mere minutes before Planning Commissioners unanimously rejected the project and the EIR. The project was deemed an “incompatible use” based on its proximity to neighborhoods.

Mitigations for protecting hundreds of wells in the vicinity of the mine played a featured role. “The stakes are just too high to get this wrong”, said Christy Hubbard, spokesperson for a local group of well owners. “The plan completely ignores the complexity and expense of providing a ‘comparable water supply’ in this area. If wells fail, it would take many years and tens of millions of dollars to connect a permanent water supply.”

After the Planning Commission hearing, residents thought it would be a short wait before the final hearing with the Supervisors, but faced with the real possibility of a no vote, Rise Gold made an attempt to circumvent the use permit process by petitioning for a “Vested Right” to mine. A vested right is a right to continue a business use that existed at the time a regulation changed. Rise claimed that, although the Idaho-Maryland Mine shut down and sold off all its assets in 1956 two years after the County started requiring use permits, all the subsequent owners of the property had an intent to mine and never explicitly abandoned their vested right.

Another hearing was scheduled to review the claim in December 2023. It didn’t go well for Rise Gold. Lawyers for the County asserted that vested rights are not permanent and the owners of the Idaho-Maryland Mine property lost that right some time within the decade after the mine closed. “In my mind, no mining activity has taken place since the early 50s.” said Hardy Bullock, Supervisor for District 5, before he voted with other supervisors to reject the petition. “The current zoning and regulatory processes apply no matter what the reasons for the [mine] to shut down over the years.”

Now finally, after years of waiting, Nevada County Supervisors are set to make a final decision about Rise Gold’s original use permit application and the EIR. The Special Public Hearing for the Idaho-Maryland Mine Project will be held February 15 and 16 at Nevada County’s Rood Center, 950 Maidu Ave, Nevada City, CA 95959, or online at <https://www.youtube.com/@CountyofNevadaCA/streams>.

Learn more about the hearing at <https://www.nevadacountyca.gov/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=7200>

Learn more about the fight against the Idaho-Maryland Mine at www.MineWatchNC.org.

Community Environmental Advocates Foundation (CEA Foundation) performs research, education, and advocacy to promote responsible land use and environmental protection policies in Nevada County. www.cea-nc.org. CEA Foundation is the leader of MineWatch, a campaign that brings together a coalition of nonprofit organizations, residents, and businesses opposed to the mine. www.MineWatchNC.org.