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## Local groups protest water application for proposed potash mine

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A potash mining interest has applied for water rights to 20,000 acre feet of well water annually for proposed operations south of Crescent Junction, but multiple entities have filed formal protests opposing the water rights transfer.

According to an application filed Sept. 30 with the Utah Division of Water Rights, Pinnacle Potash International, Ltd. of Austin, Texas, is seeking to divert groundwater from up to 16 wells in the area, on property leased from the state School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA).

The area in question is about 25 miles north of Moab and 18 miles southeast of the town of Green River, in and around the dry lake bed known as Valley City, just east of U.S. 191.

“A solution mining process will be used to extract the mined material and bring it to the surface for processing,” Pinnacle’s application states, adding that water will be injected through wells to the target mined material.

Although just three injection well locations are currently proposed, some 13 additional wells would be utilized in later phases of the project, which could last at least 30 years, according to the application.

“Water usage will initially be much less than that requested, but will gradually increase through the 30-year time,” the application states.

“That’s a lot of water,” said John Weisheit of Living Rivers, a public, non-profit organization that supports protection and restoration of Colorado River ecosystems. Weisheit submitted a formal protest letter, on behalf of Living Rivers, opposing the water rights transfer.

“Depleting 600,000 acre-feet of groundwater over 30 years is a huge withdrawal,” Weisheit added. “That is equal to what Las Vegas uses in two years and way more than Moab could ever use in the same period. I seriously doubt there is that much water in the aquifer in the first place.”

Weisheit said that the proposed mining operation would not only likely deplete the area’s groundwater entirely, but it could also cause earth movements that could damage arches and other rock formations within the nearby Arches National Park.

An acre-foot of water is equivalent to 326,000 gallons, meaning that an operation

that utilized the full allotment of 20,000 acre feet annually would be using an average of more than 17.8 million gallons of water per day, 365 days per year.

Pinnacle representatives did not immediately return telephone messages seeking comment for this article, but the company's application states that it intends to mine potash, potassium compounds, potassium salts, or other useful minerals.

The market for potash and other potassium compounds is seen as lucrative – potash prices have shot up in recent years and are currently over \$500 per ton, thanks in part to a growing demand for fertilizer in booming agricultural markets such as China and India.

A well-established and sizable potash mining operation already exists in Grand County, that being Intrepid Potash's Cane Creek mine on the banks of the Colorado River about 20 miles west of Moab. Commonly known as Moab Salt, the Intrepid Potash operation uses river water to mine potash, salt, and other minerals. Originally owned by the Texas Gulf Sulfur Co., that mine has been in operation for nearly 50 years. Intrepid Potash, LLC, based in Denver, is the largest producer of potash in the United States, operating three mines (in Moab and Wendover, Utah, and in Carlsbad, N.M.).

In contrast, neither Pinnacle Potash International, Ltd., nor its general partner Sabine International, Inc., appears to operate any existing mines as of yet, based on limited information about the company available online. Although records show the company has filed for solution mining patents over the past few years, Pinnacle Potash appears to still be in the research and development phase of its operations.

At a special meeting on Nov. 17, the Grand Water and Sewer Service Agency board of directors unanimously voted to submit a formal protest letter opposing Pinnacle's water rights application.

"It is a lot of water, and we're not quite sure how it's going to affect the Colorado River," said GWSSA Manager Mark Sovine.

In addition to Weisheit's and the GWSSA's objections, other formal protests against Pinnacle's application were filed by the Canyonlands Watershed Council, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and resident William Love of Moab, according to the Utah Division of Water Rights website.

The matter was advertised as a public notice in two consecutive issues The Times-Independent (on Oct. 27 and Nov. 3), and the same information was available on-line at Utahlegals.com. The designated protest period was scheduled to end on Nov. 23.

Utah State Engineer Kent L. Jones, the director of the state DWR office, will have the final say on the application, with such decisions typically taking up to 90

days.

In his protest letter on behalf of Living Rivers, Weisheit requested that a formal public hearing be held on the issue.

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