

Company wants to run utility corridor through public land for oil-shale mine in Uinta Basin

By Brian Maffly The Salt Lake Tribune

Published: April 7, 2016 06:43PM

Updated: April 7, 2016 09:17PM

Energy • Plan to extract and deliver oil to refineries draws fire from environmentalists.

What could be one of the nation's first commercial-level oil shale operations advanced on Thursday when the Bureau of Land Management posted a draft environmental impact statement for utility rights of way serving Enfit American Oil's mine that would extract and process kerogen-bearing rock in the Uinta Basin.

The Estonia-based firm seeks to develop a 15-mile corridor across public land to deliver power, natural gas and water to its plant and pipe up to 50,000 barrels of crude oil per day to an existing pipeline for delivery to Salt Lake City refineries.

In a coordinated response, the environmental community attacked the entire premise of a federal agency proposing to facilitate development of oil shale, viewed as a particularly "dirty" fossil fuel packing an oversize carbon punch on the climate.

"We know that burning oil shale in a giant oven can produce shale oil; the question that needs to be asked is whether proceeding with this type of project makes any sense in a carbon-constrained 21st century," said Steve Bloch, legal director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "The unequivocal answer is no. The time has come to turn our backs on the carnival barker's promise that oil shale will be the answer to our nation's energy needs.

The Green River Formation under Utah, Wyoming and Colorado harbors most of the world's kerogen, an immature hydrocarbon locked in rock that must be heated to release oil. While more than 1 trillion barrels of oil are theoretically present in this formation, the Utah Geological Survey figures about 77 billion barrels in Utah's corner is economically recoverable. This resource is located closest to the surface in the Uinta Basin, where proponents intend to mine seams up to 60 feet thick.

Enfit and Red Leaf Resources, which has developed an oil shale mine and subgrade

processing “capsules” several miles to the west, are poised to be the first in America to tap this hydrocarbon bounty in commercial quantities. But both projects have been slowed and scaled back in the face of the slump in oil prices, and both face fierce opposition from climate activists.

Enefit CEO Rikki Hrenko-Browning took issue with some of the statements in a joint news release from various groups, especially those saying that extracting oil from the shale requires large quantities of water. The oil shale process uses heat, not water, and most of the water use associated with Enefit operations would be devoted to dust control.

“We are very sensitive to the fact that water is an extremely precious resource in Utah’s arid environment. That’s why we’re committed to designing the project to be a ‘zero liquid discharge’ facility, meaning that all wastewater will be captured and reused on site,” Hrenko-Browning said. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, a 50,000-barrel-per-day oil-shale plant would use about 4,000 acre-feet of water per year.

“That’s about the same amount of water needed to grow 2,000 acres of alfalfa. With that amount of water, Enefit could meet one-third of Utah’s current annual liquid fuel demand — an impressive and beneficial use of our water resources,” Hrenko-Browning said.

But critics say there are larger stakes at play with oil shale, which they said should be left in the ground.

“President Obama was right when he said in his State of the Union that ‘we’ve got to accelerate the transition away from old, dirtier energy sources,’ ” said Ted Zukoski, an attorney with Earthjustice. “It’s time BLM got the memo and stopped wasting taxpayer money subsidizing companies that would foul our atmosphere and endanger our planet and our future.”

Enefit’s oil-shale mine and processing plant would be confined to about 9,000 acres of private land that is not subject to federal jurisdiction, but the BLM analyzed the shale operations’ broader environmental impacts, such as greenhouse-gas emissions and water use. The result is a 778-page document that neither Enefit officials nor environmental activists had time to read Thursday.

“They are being very diligent and taking a hard look at connected impacts,” Hrenko-Browning said. “Some groups want to confuse the issue by trying to connect development of the entire project to the utility corridor analysis, while in reality, the agency’s decision applies only to the 15 or so miles of BLM land that utilities will cross.”

State officials support oil-shale development, but they recommended measures to protect big game and fish, particularly where the corridor would cross the White River, home to three sensitive species of fish. In her scoping comments, the state's public-lands-policy czar Kathleen Clarke insisted the project avoids impacts that could hasten endangered status for fish such as the bluehead sucker, flannelmouth sucker and roundtail chub.

The Division of Wildlife Resources "also recommends avoiding and reducing disturbance of riverbank areas, and prohibit[ing] the stockpiling of soils on or near run-off prone areas," she wrote. "Heavy equipment should not enter the river or disturb the river bottom." The overarching goal is to avoid increasing the river's sediment load, which could harm fish.

The utility corridor envisions 19 miles of water supply pipeline, 8 miles of natural gas supply pipeline, 10 miles of oil-product line, 30 miles of single or dual overhead 138-kilovolt H-frame power lines and upgrades to 5 miles of Dragon Road.

"We designed the corridor to follow existing utility lines," Hrenko-Browning said. "We have worked very hard to identify the least impactful corridor to create the least amount of disturbance."

Enefit has yet to file for state mining permits and needs access to utilities before it can commence mining operations. But a denial of the utility rights of way would not kill the project. Enefit intends to proceed by generating power while shipping oil out and natural gas in using trucks, according to documents.

The BLM, which will accept comment through June 14, plans to host three open-house meetings in early May.

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BLM open houses

The BLM plans to host a series of open-house meetings on the Enefit project over three evenings in May, from 6 to 8 p.m. The agency will accept public comment on the proposal until June 14.

Vernal, May 3 • Uintah County Library, 204 E. 100 North

Rangely, Colo., May 4 • Western Rio Blanco Recreation and Park District, 611 S. Stanolind Ave.

Salt Lake City, May 5 • Hilton Garden Inn, 4975 Wiley Post Way

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