

Keetac expansion hearing draws crowd

Comment period continues until January 26

by Anna Kurth
Staff Writer

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HIBBING — Daniel Bird hopes a proposed expansion at Keewatin Taconite bodes well for his goal of becoming a third-generation iron miner.

Like many others from northeastern Minnesota, Bird attended a public hearing Monday in Hibbing to learn more about the proposed expansion of the U.S. Steel plant.

U.S. Steel is planning to modernize and restart an idled taconite pellet production line at Keetac. The proposed project would increase Keetac's annual taconite pellet production output by 3.6 million tons to a total output of 9.6 million tons per year.

It would also expand the mine pit and stockpile areas, increase the height of the existing tailings basin and increase dewatering activities as the mine area expands.

The meeting Monday was a chance for members of the public to learn more about a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the project developed jointly by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

It is the only public meeting to be held during the draft EIS public comment period, which runs until Jan. 26.

Members of the public were able to meet with representatives from the DNR, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and the Army Corps of Engineers who answered questions about impact of the proposed project on air quality, wetlands, expansion areas, cultural resources and water resources. U.S. Steel also had representatives there to speak about the project.

The public was invited to give comments on the draft EIS orally to a stenographer or in written form during the meeting.

Bird said he appreciated the information because it allowed him to learn more about the project and what hunting and fishing areas may be affected by it.

"I just wanted to find out more about the expansion," he said. "...The expansion would be good for guys who are out of work and all of us guys who are trying to get our foot in the door."

Members of the public inquired about how the proposed project would affect access to public lands for recreational activities and the proximity of borders of the proposed pit to residences in Kelly Lake, said Jennifer Engstrom of the DNR.

Adverse impacts from the proposed increase of the stock pile and mine pit highlighted in the draft EIS include:

- 780 acres of wetlands would be filled or drained
- 560 acres of upland forest would be converted to mine pit or stockpile
- 30 individual plant species listed by the state as threatened or endangered would be removed
- The historic Bennett Shaft No. 2 mine would be destroyed
- Public and tribal access to about 400 acres of trackable state lands would be lost.

Impacts from expansion at the plant itself include increased air pollutants, potential visibility impacts at regional wilderness areas and national parks, and affects to wild rice in waters that receive discharge from the Keetac facility, said Peter Miller, project manager for Wenck Associates, the firm contracted to prepare the EIS document.

Benefits from the expansion include increased employment and tax revenue during the years of operation. An expanded Keetac would allow for increased production and produce for an estimated 25 years.

If the plant does not expand, it will continue producing a maximum of six million tons annually and maintain its remaining mine pit, stockpiles and tailing footprint. It's estimated the mine would need to close in 12 years due to the exhaustion of resources if the plant does not expand, Miller said.

Proposed mitigations to the adverse impacts highlighted in the draft EIS include wetland creation, mine land reclamation, documentation of the Bennett Shaft, air emission controls, and a sulfate removal system to reduce sulfate discharge into water from the existing plant.

Mitigation plans have not yet been developed for the impacts to threatened and endangered plants, or the loss of public and tribal access to state land. A mitigation plan for visibility issues in the national parks and wilderness areas is still under evaluation, he said.

Eric Erkkila, of Duluth, said he attended the meeting to learn more about the project and its status and described the presentation as informative.

Anna Kurth can be reached at akurth@hibbingdailytribune.net. To read this story and comment on it online go to www.hibbingmn.com.