



OUR VIEW

Good news on new mining project

Mar 29, 2016

Arizona's mining history dates long before the territory became a state. The industry has brought prosperity to areas like Tombstone and Bisbee where the discovery of silver, gold, copper and other precious metals has generated jobs for thousands over the years and still represents an important part of Arizona's economy.

So there were mixed feelings when news that the Excelsior Mining Company had plans to develop its property east of Dragoon, not far from Texas Canyon. Images of what open pit mining can do to a landscape, with large construction equipment hollowing out huge holes and creating massive piles of tailings, would be in sharp contrast to one of the most scenic spots in the state.

Pictures of Texas Canyon and the sloping landscape that falls eastward from the Little Dragoons appear regularly in state tourism publications. The history of the region, including the nearby world-renowned Amerind Museum, are important to the identity of Southeast Arizona.

But fears that the new mining operation will be anything other than beneficial for Cochise County are misplaced. Excelsior's new operation will not be an open pit mine, instead utilizing a process commonly deployed in recovering uranium.

The in-situ recovery process will leach copper from bedrock located 600 to 1,200 feet below the surface, pumping a weak acid into the ground, then recovering that solution through nearby wells and transporting it to Johnson Camp Mine, less than a mile away on

the north side of Interstate 10. The wells will have a low-profile on the landscape and no excavation will be needed to exhume the copper from the ground.

Concerns that the acid will affect the groundwater are also misplaced. Each well is encased in concrete and is pumped far below the aquifer. The acid is pumped into the bedrock and recovered by four surrounding hydraulic wells, which capture the solution for its eventual recovery. Even more ideal, the composition of the surrounding landscape is limestone, which will serve to neutralize any of the acid, should it find a way to escape.

Best of all, this process allows for a gradual expansion of mining operations, based on the price of copper. Unlike the “boom or bust” economies of open pit mining — which depends on a high enough copper price to pay the cost of operating trucks and construction equipment — the in-situ recovery process is comparatively cheap. Even at today’s low copper price of about \$2.30 per pound, the cost of what Excelsior is planning is less than half that amount, providing plenty of margin for investors and financial security for the company.

And that’s the best news of all. Beyond paying almost \$5 million in back taxes when the company purchased Johnson Camp Mine in December, Excelsior will bring more than 100 new jobs to the county, and its mining operation is expected to contribute more than \$2 billion to the Arizona economy over the 27-year life of the project.

We welcome Excelsior’s Gunnison Copper Project for its environmental sensibility and the economic promise it represents.