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## **Agencies release Final EIS on Proposed Smoky Canyon Mine, Panels F&G Expansion**

**Idaho Falls, Idaho:** The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Idaho Falls District and the Caribou-Targhee National Forest will release the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) to the public for the Smoky Canyon Mine, Panels F & G beginning on October 17, 2007. The FEIS was prepared in cooperation with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and in consultation with numerous other state and federal agencies.

The Final EIS analyzes impacts of the J.R. Simplot Company's proposal to extend current open pit phosphate mining operations at Smoky Canyon Mine south into two existing federal phosphate leases (Manning Creek–Panel F and Deer Creek–Panel G). The leases are administered by BLM's Pocatello Field Office and are located on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. If approved, the proposed extension of mining operations would include modification (enlargement) of the Panel F lease and approval of a mine plan by the BLM. Simplot would also have to obtain authorization from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) for roads and utilities on National Forest System land outside the lease boundaries that are needed for mining operations.

“A lot of effort has gone into this EIS to develop on-the-ground mining practices and methods that are state of the art,” stated Joe Kraayenbrink, BLM's Idaho Falls District Manager. “The alternatives are designed to keep surface and ground water well within acceptable state and federal water quality standards. In the future, we should expect that mining and reclamation practices are held to an extremely high standard, and Smoky Canyon will be a trendsetter. It's no longer business as usual.”

The BLM and USFS have been working on the EIS for more than four years, longer than is normally taken for a project of this size. The extended time reflects the intensive public outreach that has been ongoing through the process. Public scoping for this project was conducted in 2003 and resulted in identification of numerous issues, which are described in Section 1.6 of the document. The draft EIS was released in December of 2005, and more than 38,600 public comments were received, reviewed and considered.

“The level of public interest with this project is unprecedented for the phosphate patch,” stated Larry Timchak, Forest Supervisor for the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. “As decision makers, we need to balance the public concerns with the laws and regulations that govern our management to reach a decision that provides for future phosphate mining in an environmentally sound and legal manner. I believe we have done that.”

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The BLM and Forest Service will each issue a separate Record of Decision (ROD) to be released following a 30-day FEIS availability period. This period starts on October 27, 2007. Following this period, the agencies will consider comments received on the FEIS prior to releasing the ROD.

In addition to the proposal from Simplot, the Final EIS also analyzes the environmental impacts of a range of reasonable alternatives, including a no action alternative (continuing with present operations, but not approving the expansion).

A total of seven mining and eight transportation alternatives were evaluated. The agencies' preferred alternative includes the following major components:

- It would approve mining as proposed in the leased areas, including Simplot's proposed road to Panel F.
- It would approve the West Haul/Access Road to Panel G, which would bypass private lands. This alternative would allow for mine operations, but would keep most impacts further away from the populated areas in the Crow Creek Valley.
- It would also require Simplot to implement an engineered cover system to prevent precipitation from percolating through selenium-laden waste rock and into groundwater sources. Simplot would also implement a 30-acre test cover on Panel E prior to installation of the cover on Panel F.
- Finally, it would require the mine's electrical line to be located in the road right of way, rather than going overland as was originally proposed.

Surface disturbance from the entire Preferred Alternative would total about 1, 449 acres.

In addition to the engineered cover to prevent the leaching of selenium, the agencies would require Simplot to employ other measures to reduce environmental impacts such as: topsoil salvage and conservation; create vegetative islands of diversity to promote reestablishment of vegetation; implementation of Best Management Practices (BMPs) to control sediment; use of culverts designed to pass adult and juvenile fish at perennial stream crossings; implementation of migratory bird surveys prior to vegetation removal; time ground disturbance to least impact migratory birds; reforestation of east and north facing reclaimed slopes; use of oil spill prevention control and countermeasures; backfill almost 90 percent of the waste rock; and reclamation of disturbed lands as mining proceeds to reduce exposure time.

The Final EIS also describes the extensive monitoring program that would be required. Both the construction and performance of the engineered cover would be monitored. Surface and groundwater monitoring programs would be implemented to demonstrate effectiveness of employed mitigation measures, provide early detection of possible impacts from the mine, and determine compliance with state and federal water quality standards. The fisheries monitoring program includes a three tiered approach that would monitor fisheries habitat, fish populations, and possible contaminant levels in the fish and aquatic food base.

Prevention of the leaching of selenium and other pollutants at newly proposed phosphate mines was of chief concern as the agencies conducted the analysis of Simplot's proposed expansion at Smoky Canyon

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Mine. State of the art analysis indicates that the project, as mitigated by the agencies and Simplot, would maintain compliance with state and federal water quality standards.

There are numerous protection measures both proposed by Simplot and required by the agencies. One of the most important environmental protection measures will be the installation of an engineered store and release cover system over all potentially seleniferous materials, including both the backfilled pits and external waste rock dumps.

This cover system is designed using natural, locally occurring materials [rock, clay, and topsoil] to reduce the amount of rain and snow melt that can percolate through the waste rock and leach selenium. At over six feet thick, this cover system will also reduce the possibility of vegetation taking up selenium through their roots, and minimize erosion of seleniferous waste rock.

The majority of proposed activities take place within the Sage Creek and Mead Peak Inventoried Roadless Areas. Since analysis of Simplot's proposal began, Forest Service rules regarding the management of Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) have changed. On September 19, 2006, the United States District Court for the Northern District of California issued a decision reinstating the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (RACR).

As a result of this ruling, the RACR currently governs roadless area management on National Forest System lands. The RACR generally prohibits road construction and timber harvest in IRAs. However it does contain provisions that recognize pre-existing rights and has exemptions to its prohibition on road construction in IRAs under these circumstances. In this case, Simplot has purchased from the Federal government the right to mine the phosphate reserves contained within the Manning and Deer Creek leases. Both leases were issued prior to the effective date of the RACR and because of their pre-existing status, approval of road construction and timber harvest is consistent with the RACR.

Simplot has also applied for modifications or enlargements to the Manning Creek lease. The RACR does not prohibit BLM from leasing land in IRAs. Because the mine plan described in the Agency Preferred Alternative provides that mining will not occur in the South Lease Modification area until at least three years from the date of approval of the mine plan, and in consideration that the current RACR may change as a result of rule making or lawsuits, no determination is currently necessary regarding which regulations apply to mining activities within the South Lease Modification area. However, to maintain the status quo on the ground until this determination is made, the mine plan approval and issuance of the lease modification would be conditioned such that no mining activities, road construction and/or surface disturbing activities would be allowed in the South Lease Modification area until a subsequent determination is made.

For a copy of the FEIS document, or more information about the Smoky Canyon Mine EIS process, log on to [www.blm.gov/id/st/en/fo/pocatello/programs/planning/smoky\\_canyon\\_mine.html](http://www.blm.gov/id/st/en/fo/pocatello/programs/planning/smoky_canyon_mine.html), or contact the BLM Pocatello Field Office at 208-478-6340. The same information can also be acquired by logging on to [www.fs.fed.us/r4/caribou-targhee/phosphate](http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/caribou-targhee/phosphate) or contacting the Caribou-Targhee National Forest Mineral Branch at 208-236-7500.