Wishbone Hill Coal Mine

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LAST MODIFIED: 12TH AUGUST 2019
CREATED: JAN. 19, 2018



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Background

The Wishbone Hill Mine is a proposed coal mine in the Matanuska Valley approximately 5 miles west of downtown Sutton, AK. The site is on the border of the Sutton/Alpine and Buffalo/Soapstone Community Council boundaries and is within a mile of residences housing nearly 900 people (http://www.adn.com/article/20141014/state-grants-permit-usibelli-disputed-wishbone-hill-mine-project). Usibelli Coal Mine Inc. (/Issues/AlaskaCoal/UsibelliCoalMine.html) began exploration work in this area in the summer of 2010 (http://www.adn.com/2010/03/16/1186515/usibelli-wants-to-start-work-on.html) and has already found a probable buyer (http://www.adn.com/2010/05/26/1295905/usibelli-has-potential-buyer-for.html) for the coal. This area was historically mined for coal (AlaskaCoalHistory.html) as early as 1916 and was most recently mined in the 1980s (at Premier Mine (http://www.usibelli.com/Coal-Wishbone-Hill.php)). Former mines occupy a relatively small percentage of the surrounding

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Matanuska Valley, the majority of which consists of mixed deciduous/spruce forest and is part of the Matanuska Moose Range. Abundant 4-wheeler trails provide access for hunting and other recreational uses.

Maps showing land ownership plots near proposed Wishbone Hill mine sites (green) as well as trails in the area (purple).

Project Status

In 1997 Usibelli purchased the lease (http://www.usibelli.com/Coal-Wishbone-Hill.php) for the 8,000 acre Wishbone Hill Mine site from Cook Inlet Regional Corporation. The lease is estimated to contain 14 million tons of bituminous coal (as opposed to the lower grade subbituminous coal (TypesOfCoal.html) currently mined by Usibelli near Healy), that could be recovered using strip mining techniques. The current mine proposed (http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBQQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.usibrochure-web.pdf&rct=j&q=wishbone%20hill%20mine%20usibelli&ei=Us-DTfu9JaT0tQPbpdyVBg&usg=AFQjCNEeB2pFcdG-nARSdWHAmZbcvMsMcw&cad=rja) by Usibelli would mine 6 million tons of coal, at the rate of 500,000 tons per year, for an expected mine life of 12 years.

The mine project is highly controversial within the neighboring communities, and political groups have organized around both the support of and opposition to coal development. Usibelli has nearly all required permits, however the federal Office of

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Surface Mining has yet to issue a final ruling on whether Usibelli's mining permit remains valid after calling these permits into question (http://www.alaskapublic.org/2012/07/24/wishbone-hill-mining-permits-called-into-question/) in 2012.

Regional Mining History

In 1916 and 1917, as the railroad was being constructed from Seward to Fairbanks, a spur line was built along the Matanuska River to access the coal seams in this area. The railroad corporation purchased the Eska Mine near Wishbone Hill, and used its coal to power the construction and operation of the rail line for the next year. Coal mining peaked in the early 1920s, when the Navy became interested in fueling its ships with Matanuska coal. A large coal washery was built in Sutton, then closed in 1922, two weeks after opening, as the Navy phased out coal use.

Coal mining in the region never returned to that peak, but a number of small mines operated in and around Wishbone Hill over the ensuing decades, including Evan Jones (1920-68), Buffalo (1939-53), and Premier (1922-early 80s, intermittent production). The last mine closed around 30 years ago, and few of the original workers still live in the region.

This area has been the site of a number of coal fires (/Issues/AlaskaCoal/CoalFires.html), some burning since the 1960's, and has been the focus of a multi-million dollar effort (http://dnr.alaska.gov/shared/mediareleases/dsp_media_release.cfm?id=620&title=Sutton%20Coal%20Fires) to supress the fires.

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Historic mining activity along Moose Creek, running along the edge of Wishbone Hill, created impassable waterfalls and cut off salmon habitat. The Moose Creek Salmon Restoration project (http://wildfish.montana.edu/Cases/browse_details.asp?ProjectID=73) provided fish passage around these waterfalls and provided new in-stream and floodplain habitat. This restoration has been so successful that salmon have now been found in nearby Buffalo Creek as welll, which could further complicate a mine plan.

Project Details

The Wishbone Hill lease was originally issued in 1956, and lay dormant for decades. Some exploration drilling was conducted in the 1980s, and Idemitsu Alaska received an Alaska Surface Coal Mine Control and Reclamation Act exploration permit in 1991. This permit was subsequently purchased by Cook Inlet Region Incorporated (CIRI) in 1995, and by Usibelli Coal Mine company in 1997.

Usibelli possesses renewable exploration permits for this mine, but would need to obtain production permits before mining. The mine would receive power from the nearby grid and would transport coal either via truck to Seward (where a coal export facility (/Issues/AlaskaCoal/SewardCoalPort.html) already exists), by truck to Palmer (where it could be loaded onto the railroad to Seward), or by truck to Port MacKenzie (http://www.adn.com/article/20100607/usibelli-tests-coal-loading-port-mackenzie-dreams-rail-line) (particularly attractive if a rail spur is built (/Issues/Infrastructure/Port-MacKenzie-Railroad-

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Extension.html)). Up to 100 trucks per day (http://www.adn.com/article/20100316/usibelli-wants-start-work-coal-mine-near-sutton) will be expected on the Glenn Highway between Sutton and Palmer under any of these options, and along an additional 167 miles of highway if the trucks continued from Palmer to Seward.

As of 2014, Usibelli has put in a road across the lease area and clear cut a corridor through the forest along either side of the road route. They have received their air quality permit but it has been challenged by the Native Village of Chickaloon, represented by Earthjustice.

Controversy

The communities surrounding Wishbone Hill and coal leases at Jonesville and Chickaloon are sharply divided over the issue of coal development. Erin and Hig of Ground Truth Trekking visited the area in fall 2014 and met with residents on both sides of the issue to discuss potential coal development - the following largely represents those conversations.

Proponents argue that resource jobs are high-paying and local, and would reduce the need for residents to commute to Palmer and Anchorage for work. Additionally, money from the development would provide for community services such as road maintenance. Borough taxes are estimated (http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu/Publications/wishbone_hill_impacts_final.pdf) at nearly a half-million dollars, and state royalties at over a million dollars. Much of this would

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be spent covering increased school enrollment, but some additional funds would remain. Some who remember the era of active coal mining express hope that Wishbone Hill could bring back a lost community vitality, citing tight-knit social bonds, more kids in the school, and more community activities and services during that era. They note that mining regulations have become dramatically more restrictive, making environmental issues less likely.

Opponents cite impacts including pollution from blowing coal dust, exhaust from coal-transport trucks and other machinery, and affects on groundwater. They also expect loss of wildlands, loss of hunting and recreational opportunities, and damage to salmon runs (including the newly-restored Moose Creek salmon run). Many opponents spoke about the strengths of the community as it exists today, and point out that Wishbone Hill is projected to have a relatively short (around 12 years) life–a boom with development would likely be followed by a bust when the mine closes. This division runs between the Chikaloon Tribe, lead by coal opponent Chief Gary Harrison, and the Chikaloon Native Corporation, which is strongly in favor of coal development. Many opponents of coal development say they would move out of the area if new coal mines opened.

Though concerns about climate change have driven restrictions on coal nationwide (http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21603482-presidents-new-climate-rule-will-change-america-he-hopes-it-will-change-china-and), this issue hasn't entered strongly into the local conversation. When prompted,

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most coal opponents expressed concerns about climate change and thought it should be more widely discussed, while coal opponents dismissed climate change as an issue at all.

Latest News

In July 2012, the federal Office of Surface Mining and Reclamation told the Alaska DNR (https://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/feds-question-permits-wishbone-hill-coal-mine-mat-su) that there were concerns about the validity of the permits at Wishbone Hill. However, the Alaska DNR has pushed back (http://newsminer.com/view/full_story/19684302/article-Alaska-pushes-back-on-federal-involvement-in-coal-mine?instance=home_news_window_left_bullets) and declared that the permits are valid. In November 2014, the feds agreed the permits are valid, but emphasized (http://www.adn.com/article/20141128/feds-scold-state-usibelli-permit-renewals) that DNR had failed to provide a clear rational for extending a 1991 permit.

In June 2014, Usibelli recieved their air quality permit (http://www.adn.com/2014/06/11/3512784/coal-mine-near-palmer-gets-long.html?sp=/99/188/) and in October 2014 they received approval (http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/mining/coal/wishbone/ffd10032014final.pdf) of the coal surface mining permit for the project. The air quality permit was later remanded and then challenged in court. Lawsuits regarding the unclear status of the mining permit are also ongoing (http://www.adn.com/article/

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20150319/lawsuit-targets-federal-approval-mat-su-coal-mine-permits). Uncertainly remained as of early 2017 when the validity of the permits were again challenged in court

Further Reading

> "Wishbone Hill Coal Exploration Renewal Application" to the state (May 2010 Revision) (http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/mining/coal/wishbone/2010RenewalApplicationRev1.pdf)

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