

Panel rules alternative mine sites already investigated: Environmentalists criticize review for 'blocking' issue

PUBLICATION	The Edmonton Journal
DATE	Sat 04 Mar 2000
PAGE NUMBER	A6
BYLINE	Dennis Hryciuk

Environmentalists say a panel reviewing the proposed Cheviot coal mine has blocked attempts to find out if the owners have alternative locations for the mine.

A federal-provincial panel conducting hearings on the mine ruled Friday the question of alternative sites has already been dealt with in previous hearings and in a court challenge launched by environmental groups.

But conservationist Dianne Pachal said the ruling ignores the fact the two parent companies that would own Cheviot have not been asked about other locations for the mine.

"They're playing a shell game," Pachal said in an interview after the ruling, referring to representatives of Cardinal River Coals Ltd., the firm that would own and operate Cheviot.

Cardinal River Coals is jointly owned by Edmonton-based Luscar Ltd. and Pittsburgh-based Consol Ltd.

Earlier in the hearings, Pachal, spokesperson for environmental groups led by the Alberta Wilderness Association, asked the three-member panel to direct Cardinal River Coals to ask its parent companies about

Environmentalists have focused on alternatives because a Federal Court ruling found the issue was not properly dealt with in previous hearings.

That decision resulted in the new hearings.

Reacting to Friday's ruling, Cardinal River Coals general manager Bill Hume said environmentalists are trying to find another legal way to challenge the mine in future.

"They're interested in litigating, not mitigating," Hume said in an interview. "They've shown no interest in the social or economic aspects of the project. They're anti-family."

At Friday's session, Trout Unlimited officials said they're concerned about a warning issued this week about levels of selenium found in fish caught near coal mines in the region.

Alberta Health issued a news release Thursday warning people not to eat too many fish taken from some streams in the area because of elevated levels of selenium, a naturally occurring element.

The non-metallic element is common in small amounts, but could cause skin lesions or brittle hair and nails in higher

alternatives.

But Cheviot project manager Fred Munn told the panel the Cheviot site is the only one that would be of mutual benefit to both parent firms.

Panel chair Brian Bietz said the question of alternatives will not be pursued further after Munn told the hearings there had been no material changes for Cardinal River since the last hearings, held three years ago.

But Pachal told the hearings Luscar's takeover of Manalta Coals last year provides an alternative for at least one Cheviot partner.

With the takeover, Luscar has acquired a mine at Line Creek, B.C., that could supply the same kind of coal Cheviot would provide, Pachal said.

Environmental groups want to stop the Cheviot project because they believe it would harm wildlife and permanently scar the landscape in the region near Jasper National Park.

concentrations, the warning said.

Cheviot officials told the hearings the element might be coming from operations at local mines and said their studies have shown no effects on fish or waterfowl and expected minimal effects on people.

Kerry Brewin, a biologist with Trout Unlimited, asked Cheviot officials what measures could be taken to deal with the situation.

Cardinal River Coals official Bob Logan said it's not clear what measures should be taken because there might be no problem involving adverse effects on wildlife or people.

"We have investigations under way," said Logan, the company's senior environmental planner.

But Pachal said mines in the area, including the proposed Cheviot project, could cause long-lasting contamination of water bodies in the region that can't be alleviated or repaired.

BACKGROUND TO HEARINGS

Following a successful court appeal by environmental groups, new hearings on the proposed \$250 million Cheviot open-pit coal mine are being held more than three years after original hearings were conducted.

As a result of the appeal, Federal Court struck down federal approval of the mine. The court ruled that a three-member panel that conducted the original hearings failed to conduct a proper review as required by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act.

Among the inadequacies cited: an incomplete review of the cumulative environmental effects of the mine in combination with other possible industrial activities in the region near Jasper National Park and the failure to properly consider alternatives to the mine.

The proposed mine -- 23 km long and 3.5 km wide -- is to replace the nearby Luscar mine that employs 400 people and is running out of coal.
