



Public Scoping and Notice of Proposed Action & Opportunity to Comment

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Big Spring Gold Exploration Project

Forest Service

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest
Austin Ranger District

Nye County, Nevada

July 2013

Comments Welcome

The Austin Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest welcomes your comments on the proposed Big Spring Gold Exploration Project which is located on National Forest System lands within the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. The project proponent (Big Spring Gold LLC) proposes to conduct mineral exploration in the Paradise Mountain Range.

The District has initially proposed that this proposed activity may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS) [36 CFR 220]. A proposed action may be categorically excluded only if there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action and the proposed action is within a category listed in section 31.12 or 32.2 of FSH 1909.15. This proposed action falls within section 32.2(8) [cited as 36 CFR 220.6(e)(8)] –

(8) Short-term (1 year or less) mineral, energy, or geophysical investigations and their incidental support activities that may require cross-country travel by vehicles and equipment, construction of less than 1 mile of low standard road, or use and minor repair of existing roads.

The Forest Service is applying notice, comment, and appeal regulations found at 36 CFR 215 (specific to EAs) to this project due to a recent U.S. District Court decision.

This document initiates both the scoping process (40 CFR 1501.7) and provides notice of the 30-day comment period pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215. The purpose of this comment period is to provide opportunity for the public to provide meaningful input on the proposed action prior to a decision by the Responsible Official.

Background

The Austin Ranger District received a Plan of Operations from Big Spring Gold, LLC, proposing an exploration drilling project in the Ellsworth Mining District. Big Spring Gold, LLC, has approximately

270 mining claims in T13N, R37E, and T13N, R37E (MDM), which cover the area around the Big Spring Mine and the site of Ellsworth.

Gold-silver ore was first discovered near the site of Ellsworth in 1863 (Kral, V.E., 1951, Mineral Resources of Nye County, Nevada: University of Nevada Bulletin, Geology and Mining Series No. 50, 223 p.). The recorded production from several mines near Ellsworth is small but the early activity is poorly documented. The Big Spring mine is reported to have narrow quartz veins which are generally of low grade but one sample collected by the Bureau of Mines in 1935 assayed about 0.53 ounces per ton gold.

Nash (1994) categorized the mineral deposits of the Ellsworth district, including the Marble Falls area west of Ellsworth, as plutonic-associated polymetallic veins hosted by pre-Tertiary sedimentary and volcanic rocks (Nash, J.T., 1994, Geochemical signatures of silver and gold deposits, Tonopah 1° x 2° quadrangle, Nevada – Description and applications to exploration: U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 2077, 46 p.). Such veins may contain various combinations and proportions gold, silver, lead, zinc, and copper. However, Nash (1994) also noted that the Return mine, which is about 2 ½ miles west of Ellsworth, has a different style of mineralization. It has silver-rich veins with low lead-zinc-copper in Tertiary volcanic rocks.

There are numerous abandoned shafts, adits, and prospect pits on Big Spring Gold's mining claims. There is no evidence of drilling within the past 30 years in the vicinity of the drill sites proposed by Big Spring Gold, LLC.

Analysis Area

The Big Spring Gold project is located on the Austin Ranger District approximately 13 miles northeast of Gabbs, Nevada, in the Paradise Mountain Range. Exploration activities would occur in sections 18 and 19 of Township 13 North, Range 38 East, and in section 13, T13N, R37E (Mt. Diablo Meridian). The topography is hilly with no perennial streams. Ellsworth Canyon is a well developed drainage south of the project area and has intermittent flow. Big Spring is a developed, perennial spring with a water trough in the northern part of the project area and is about 800 feet from the nearest proposed borehole. Elevation of the project area ranges from 6,800 to 7,600 feet but lower and higher elevations are present adjacent to the project. Slopes are mantled by colluvium with sporadic bedrock outcrops. Pinyon-juniper woodland is the dominant vegetation type with only scattered bitterbrush, sagebrush, and various forbs and grasses.

Purpose and Need for Action

The proponent's need is to determine if economically viable mineral deposits exist within the proposed project area, and to define the nature and extent, shape, and economic value of those deposits, if identified.

The purpose of this proposed action is to authorize exploration activities consistent with the statutory right of the proponent to explore for and develop mineral resources on federally-administered lands under the General Mining Law of 1872. Surface management regulations (36 CFR 228) require that all mineral exploration, development, and operations activities be conducted in a manner that minimizes adverse environmental impacts on National Forest surface resources (36 CFR 228.8). Mineral exploration in the area proposed for the project adheres to the Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan of 1986, particularly the following Standards and Guidelines for Minerals:

1- Encourage exploration and development of mineral resources and minimizing possible adverse impacts to surface resources, and

4 – Require operating plans which minimize impacts to surface and cultural resources and provide for reclamation of disturbed areas. (p. IV-57)

Proposed Action

The action proposed is to collect samples of rock for mineral and chemical analysis from below the ground surface by means of boreholes. Big Spring Gold LLC proposes to drill 19 boreholes from 18 drill pads. The drill pads would be accessed by existing roads, approximately 3,700 feet of new temporary road, and by overland travel of approximately 300 feet. 6-inch diameter boreholes would be drilled to depths of 500-1,000 feet using the reverse circulation method.

The drill pads would be constructed to provide an approximately level surface with an area of about 3,200 square feet for the track-mounted drill, associated equipment, two 5'x10'x5' sumps (mud pits), and pickup parking. The drillers would use an equipment lay-down area, which requires no construction, of about 10,000 square feet. A tracked dozer and a rubber-tired backhoe/loader would be used to construct the roads, drill pads, and sumps. A 2,000-gallon water truck would supply water for the drill and for dust-suppression, if needed. Up to 3 geologists would stay in a camp consisting of a 21-foot long trailer and two wall tents during drilling. Sanitary facilities would be self-contained and trash would be hauled off site. Construction and drilling are expected to take about 40 days.

The surface disturbance due to new construction would be about 1.27 acres and that due to drill pads 1.32 acres. Disturbance due to overland travel and at the camp and lay-down area would be minimal but if included in the total, then total surface disturbance would be almost 3.2 acres.

Reclamation

Upon completion of drilling, the boreholes would be plugged and abandoned so as to protect ground water. All abandonment material would be placed by tremie pipe from the bottom of the hole upward to fill the hole even if the bottom of the hole is above the water table. A cement surface seal of at least 20 feet would cap settled or set-up abandonment material (as required by Nevada Code NAC 534.420(6) or 534.4371(2)b). Zones of lost circulation or of different water quality or hydraulic head would be sealed by neat cement in confining zones above and below to prevent the vertical movement of water. Boreholes would be plugged before the drill moves to the next hole.

Drill pads, sumps, and new roads would be regraded to pre-project contours. Stockpiled soil would be spread on top of regraded areas. Disturbed areas would be raked and seeded with a Forest Service-approved seed mix. At least a portion of the reclamation bond would be held for at least three growing seasons to ensure successful revegetation and control of noxious weeds.

Environmental Protection Measures

Environmental protection measures are proposed to avoid or minimize potential negative effects to resources surrounding and within the project area. Specific measures currently include, but are not necessarily limited to the following list.

Air Quality: Dust control would be accomplished by watering access routes as necessary. A minimal amount of limb trimming and removal of trees is anticipated for access roads and in areas where existing roads experience overgrowth; no burning of slash is planned.

Water Quality: Water would be used as a drilling lubricant, to carry the cuttings to the surface of the boreholes, and for dust suppression. Drilling fluids and cuttings would be contained in sumps to ensure they do not enter surface waters drainages. Disturbed areas would be reclaimed to restore vegetative cover and to reduce the potential for erosion.

Solid Wastes: Drill cuttings and trash would be the only solid wastes generated by the Project. Cuttings would be contained in sumps. Trash would be collected and taken to approved off-site disposal facilities.

Scenic Values: Drill sites and new roads would be reclaimed within one year of the start of project construction to minimize potential visual impacts.

Wildlife and Vegetation: Exploration activities would not occur between May 1st and July 15th to avoid potential conflicts with migratory and breeding birds unless a nesting survey is conducted and appropriate mitigation measures taken. Sumps would be constructed with exit ramps for the protection of livestock or wildlife and would be backfilled after drying. All equipment would be washed prior to entering the project area to prevent the introduction of noxious weeds. The operator would cooperate with the Forest Service to inventory, monitor, and control noxious weeds plants within areas of disturbance until the release of all bond monies. Disturbed areas would be reclaimed upon completion of the project to restore vegetation and wildlife habitat.

Cultural Resources: Project construction would be designed to avoid known cultural resources. If undiscovered archaeological or cultural resources are encountered during project work, activity in that area would cease immediately, the Forest Service would be notified, and the resources would be evaluated. The results of the evaluation would determine subsequent action.

Hazardous Substances: The only hazardous materials used during the exploration program would be fuels, oils, hydraulic fluid, and antifreeze related to the drill and motor vehicles. These would be contained in the vehicles or in leak-free containers. Oil would not be changed in the project area. Although it is unlikely to be needed, storage of petroleum products in containers larger than 120 gallons would be within diked areas lined with impervious material.

Monitoring

During the project, Big Spring Gold LLC would cooperate with the Forest Service to monitor all project activities. Monitoring would include but not be limited to:

- Drilling
- Sediment control
- Road maintenance
- Reclamation
- Noxious weed control

At the conclusion of the project, reclaimed areas would be monitored for at least three years to ensure successful establishment of vegetation, per the revegetation standards established in the *Nevada Guidelines for Successful Revegetation* for the NDEP, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Forest Service, are attained. Monitoring for the control of erosion and control of noxious weeds would be carried out in conjunction with reclamation monitoring.

How to Comment and Timeframe

Comments are being accepted under both the scoping process (40 CFR 1501.7) and the 30-day comment period pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215. It is important for readers to understand the difference between the two processes. Scoping comments can be accepted at any time during the analysis process and do not confer any appeal rights. The 30-day comment period is specifically established by regulation and cannot be extended.

Only those who provide comment or express interest in this proposal during the 30 day comment period will be eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of this notice in the Battle Mountain Bugle, Battle Mountain, Nevada. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this analysis. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period. It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period.

Written comments must be submitted to: Steven Williams, District Ranger, 100 Midas Canyon Road, P.O. Box 130, Austin, NV 89310, facsimile – (775) 964-1451. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official’s office during normal business hours via telephone (775-964-2671) or in person, or at an official agency function (i.e. public meeting) that is designed to elicit public comments. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, portable document format (.pdf), plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc or .docx) to this email address: comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-austin-tonopah@fs.fed.us . In cases where no identifiable name is attached to a comment, a verification of identity will be required for appeal eligibility. If using an electronic message, a scanned signature is one way to provide verification. Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6.

Comments received in response to this notice, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

Late comments will be accepted as “scoping comments” and considered to the extent reasonable, but as stated above, late commenters will not be eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

For further information please contact Steven Williams or George Langstaff at 775-964-2671 or email to swilliams01@fs.fed.us or gdlangstaff@fs.fed.us . We thank you for your interest in our National Forests.

/s/ Steven Williams

July 18, 2013

STEVEN WILLIAMS
Austin District Ranger

Date

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