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Subsistence Alaska village fights mining road

The Associated Press

7/28/2014

ALLAKAKET, Alaska — After another year of abysmal king salmon runs, with rain-swollen rivers making it nearly impossible to catch chum or silvers and with decades of declining moose and caribou populations, many residents of Allakaket are bristling at the prospect of a 200-mile industrial road running through their hunting and fishing grounds.



Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge Manager Mike Spindler explains some of the issues and concerns the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could have with building a road through a refuge during a meeting in Allakaket on the proposed road to Ambler on July 25, 2014. Spindler said a road, if built improperly, could seriously impact the environment. (Associated Press)

The village is opposing a multimillion-dollar mining road that would have 15 major river crossings, including over the Alatna River, where Allakaket residents fish. The proposed road would span from the Dalton Highway to the Ambler Mining District in Northwest Alaska, The Fairbanks News-Miner reported (<http://bit.ly/1rsm6HE>) Sunday.

The road is being championed by the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority and by Canada-based NovaCopper, which wants to mine what it estimates to be hundreds of millions of tons of copper, zinc and lead in the area.

The road wouldn't be opened to the public, and mining vehicles would pay a toll. Its cost is estimated between \$190 million and \$300 million.

On Friday at school gymnasium, the Allakaket Tribal Council hosted two dozen state and federal officials, company representatives, environmentalists and members from neighboring villages to talk about the project.

Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority officials say there has been support in communities nearer to the proposed mine. Officials with the agency have said that the construction and maintenance of the road, which is more than 30 miles north of Allakaket, would provide jobs to locals. "The project could result in up to 300 jobs per year over the 2-4 year construction period," according to the agency's website.

Allakaket residents at the meeting said they are skeptical of such claims.

"This road like we're talking about is not like the Red Dog Mine," Tanana Chiefs Conference President Victor Joseph said, referring to a mine in northwest Alaska that is a major source of zinc and lead. "We think about the impact that it will have on our resources. They already talk about there not being enough moose, and they don't have enough fish. There's no guarantee here that they'll have long-term employment. ... There's no guarantees that it will improve the economy. There's none."

Project representatives were largely quiet during the meeting, but they said several times that the road is far from a done deal. The project must undergo an environmental impact study and public meetings, and the mine must get a permit to operate.

There wasn't much talk on the part of the state about what will be done



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to mitigate environmental impacts. But Mike Spindler, the manager of the neighboring Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge, which the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority has considered a possible alternative route, discussed possibilities.

The Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge isn't under any obligation to approve the construction of a road through its boundaries, Spindler said.

"Wildlife and fishing populations are in this wilderness. It will be important to identify species, identify the use and identify potential impacts," he said, adding that even something like an eagle nest along the route will need to be noted. "That's the kind of thing that has to be addressed. Line by line, each resource and how it could be impacted."

Spindler said everything from moose populations to rivers and subsistence living should be accounted for in the plan to build the road. He distributed handouts comparing river crossings that are bad and good for fish, with the bad being a simple culvert and the best being full bridges.

Any review process should take local tradition and knowledge into mind, Spindler said. Studies might cover a few years of wildlife populations, but a community's collective knowledge goes back hundreds of years, he said.

"I think too often people are quick to dismiss traditional knowledge," Spindler said.

***The Trucker* staff can be reached to comment on this article at editor@thetrucker.com.**

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