

Wind River proposal heating up

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The proposed winter road along the Wind River by Cash Minerals has whipped up a passionate and heated debate.

There have been no fewer than 90 public comments to the Yukon Environmental and Socio-economic Assessment Board (YESAB).

Submissions clearly show a gaping division between the environmental conservation community and the pro-mining camp, with no halfway compromise in sight.

Conservation groups and supporters suggest that allowing the winter road would be the beginning of the end for one of the last spectacular wilderness areas in the world.

Supporters of the mining industry maintain Cash Minerals of Vancouver is only exercising its right to explore for mineral deposits in the territory, using a well-established route, and employing the required environmental safeguards.

Others, including the First Nation of NaCho Nyak Dun of Mayo, maintain the application needs to provide more information before it can be reviewed properly.

Others still insist the application should go nowhere until the ongoing land use planning process for the Peel River Watershed is complete.

The proposal, filed by Cash Minerals on Oct. 23, is currently under review by YESAB's Mayo District office. A public open house hosted by the company is scheduled for Monday night in the community of 400. The period for public comment ends next Thursday. The district office will then have 14 days to file its recommendation to the Yukon government.

Cash Minerals is proposing to build a 167-kilometre winter bulldozer trail to haul in 2,000 barrels of diesel and jet fuel, along with supplies and drill equipment to support its four existing exploration camps. The company is searching for uranium, gold and copper.

The proposal includes a request to build another airstrip in the area, alongside the Wind River, next to one of the three cache sites. The company would use the cache to support its camp through the summer period, resulting in much shorter helicopter hauls, a reduction in cost and less disturbance by helicopters in the area. Cash Minerals is proposing to use four D7 Caterpillars to haul in the supplies, in a total of approximately 20 trips.

The 50-page application addresses fuel storage, waste management, wildlife considerations and so forth.

The area in question has become known worldwide in environmental conservation circles as the Three Rivers area; a vast, beautiful and wonderfully pristine wilderness.

To the mining community, it represents a wealth of mineral potential that has been virtually untapped, and has become one of the hot spots for the territory's exploding resurgence in mineral exploration.

The Yukon Conservation Society and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), along with many others, are asking for an outright rejection of the proposed winter road and airstrip.

At the very least, the conservation society argues, the application should be bumped up from the Mayo district office to the assessment board's executive level in Whitehorse. The project's impact goes far beyond what a district office should be asked to review, the society contends.

Karen Baltgailis, the society's executive director, maintains that approving the winter access would undoubtedly lead to the industry's desire for more permanent access through a wilderness area that is in the middle of an extensive land use planning process.

It must be emphasized, Baltgailis insisted in an interview Thursday, that rejecting the application would not prevent Cash Minerals from continuing its exploration work using air support to move ferry supplies and personnel.

She said the company has indicated it would be far less expensive to use a Cat-train to move its supplies on a winter road and cache them.

The area is home to existing commercial tourism operators and big game outfitters who say their businesses will be hurt badly with the return of a road through the pristine wilderness they count on to attract their clientele.

Essentially, said Baltgailis, the mining company is looking to save money at the expense of other commercial enterprises, not to mention the application comes in the midst of the incomplete planning exercise for the entire Peel River watershed.

She said industry would have Yukoners believe the proposed trail follows a winter road route that was established 50 years ago and is still used regularly by trappers and ATV riders, when in fact it's an old abandoned route that is growing over.

'We need to have the land use planning process in place, because we need a clear vision,' Mike Dehn, executive director of CPAWS Yukon, said yesterday, echoing the stance of the conservation society.

'We are not opposed to mining or development. But we do but we do believe some places are just jewels that should be preserved in a wilderness state.

'Our hope, and what we have been working for, is that there would be major protection of the Three Rivers area; the Wind, the Bonnet Plume and the

Snake.'

Cash Mineral vice-president Peter Arendt declined comment this morning from his Vancouver office.

'We tend not to enter a debate in the public forum,' he said. 'We are following the process as specified by YESAA regulations.

'We are confident the decision will be based on the facts and merits of the application.'

Numerous Yukon companies and individuals have written in support of Cash Minerals' request, just as numerous submissions oppose the proposal.

John Witham of the Yukon Chamber of Mines has accused the conservation side of attempting to use politics to hijack what should be a straightforward review of a straightforward land use application.

In a letter to Energy, Mines and Resources Minister Archie Lang, Witham cautions the minister to beware of the underhanded tactics of the conservation side.

'The practice of providing direct links to the comment submission section of YESAB registry from NGO websites and encouraging visitors to post spurious letters of opposition to a legitimate project, flies in the face of the YESAA class screening procedure and will set a very dangerous precedent if any credence is given to the comments generated in this matter,' Witham wrote last week.

Witham, who did not seek re-election this week as chamber president after serving two terms, pointed out to Lang the route being proposed by Cash Minerals has been used for decades. It is clearly visible from the air, and it continues to be used by regularly, says Witham's letter.

He pointed out a winter road permit was issued as recently as 2006 to another company to use a portion of the very same winter trail Cash Minerals wants to use.

To refer the application from the Mayo district to the executive level in Whitehorse would delay the review by another year, Witham writes.

He says the Wernecke Mountain area is the hottest exploration target in the Yukon today, and mineral exploration in the territory will continue to grow exponentially over the next few years.

Exploration and mining, he writes, have been and remain the backbone of the territory's economy, far in excess of what wilderness tourism contributes.

'Such an important mineralized region cannot become the private playpen for special interest groups like Wilderness International of Germany or their clone, Wilderness International Canada,' reads a submission by Dawson City resident Joe Yanisiw, who helped drive in the original trail in 1959.

Outfitters Alan and Mary Ellen Young, on the other hand, write that the proposal would have an enormous impact on their \$1-million dollar plus business, and they only heard about it through the grapevine.

'The Wind River Trail was built many years ago, is now virtually nonexistent and is exactly that, a trail, not a road,' the Youngs write. 'It is overgrown with willow and poplar and crosses literally a hundred drainages, watercourses and muskeg. There is no way they can walk a Caterpillar through this country without damaging the ecosystem, fish habitat, riparian areas and leave a footprint that will exist forever.'

All that, the Youngs write, on top of the risk a uranium mine would pose to public health and water sources.