

City of Bethel opposes mining on Tuluksak

by Patti Harper
for the Tundra Times

Tuluksak villagers gained an ally last week in their fight against Northland Gold Dredging Company. The City of Bethel will be joining in the appeal against a Bureau of Land Management decision allowing Northland to resume dredging operations near Nyac, located about 35 miles up the Tuluksak River from the village, which is roughly 30 miles up the Kuskokwim River from Bethel.

Villagers have been battling the company alone for two years. They're angry about dredging actions by Northland during its first years of operation in 1981-1983.

Villagers assert muddy waters caused by the dredging killed fish and ruined their drinking water. Company officials claim their operation has had and will have little negative impact on the area's fish, wildlife, and water.

But, Northland Gold Dredging was cited in 1983 for water quality violations and forced to suspend operations until a new mining plan is approved. The company has become the focus of residents' concern over the effect of placer mining in the area, which began sixty years ago.

Bethel City Officials insist the environmental assessment upon which BLM based its approval of Northland's new plan is not detailed enough. They want a formal environmental impact statement completed. They're concerned about a potential impact

on Kuskokwim River commercial fishing, a major element of Bethel's economy.

According to Ken Hamm, Bethel's City planner, the BLM environmental assessment states that the new mining plan would result in larger beaver populations, and more beaver dams which may inhibit fish spawning. Increased beaver activity might also cause greater water turbidity which could harm smelt.

According to Hamm, the BLM assessment dismisses the beaver problem as unimportant, because beaver populations are increasing anyway. Hamm thinks the potential cumulative impact of natural beaver increase, resulting from the mining operation, should be analyzed.

This is just one example, he thinks of the need for a more detailed, formal environmental impact statement. An EIS would analyze a worst case scenario for negative impacts, it would look at the cumulative effect of the Northland operation with other developments in the region, and would require a formal public comment process -- all things which are lacking in the environmental assessment, said Hamm.

In appealing the BLM decision, the City of Bethel is making a statement for the future as much as it's taking a stand on the Tuluksak situation. This is the first major project of its kind which the city has had the opportunity to comment on.

Mayor Joe Sullivan said the ci-

ty is not anti-development, but wants to be sure that potential impacts of any major development project are clearly understood before that development is allowed to take place.

At an earlier, emotional meeting before Bethel's City Council, Tuluksak villagers asked for support, while Chuck Hawley, owner of Northland Gold Dredging, urged the Council to stay out of the matter. He said their action might delay the startup of another season.

Hawley told the local

newspaper in March that "our aim is to be a model for responsible placer mining in Alaska. We plan to demonstrate our understanding of and concern for the local residents and for the many values of the area."

He's been saying similar things for more than a year, and offered to provide jobs for villagers. But, he seems to have made no progress toward convincing Tuluksak residents of his goodwill.

At the meeting, villagers angrily demanded that he face them

when speaking about the impact of the mining operation on resources they now use, and plan to rely upon in the future.

BLM approval is the last in a long series of permit approvals which Northland Gold Dredging has already obtained from state and federal agencies. The appeals now send the matter to the Interior Department's Board of Land Appeals. But, no one thinks the matter will end there. Federal District Court is expected to be the arena for a final fight.