

MINE PAINS

Huckleberry dogged by flare-ups

Second of 2 parts

By Paul Luke
Staff Reporter

HOUSTON

John Osterbrook and 200 other construction workers are racing to finish what should become B.C.'s newest base-metal mine, before

next September.

But the 34-year-old ironworker could soon find himself and his mates thrown out of work at the Huckleberry mine.

Even as Osterbrook bolts a steel beam for the operation's mill, a fight to stop the mine continues.

On Oct. 29, the nearby Cheslatta Indian band will ask a B.C. Supreme Court judge in

Vancouver to set aside the mine's project approval certificate, pending a re-examination by B.C.'s environmental assessment office.

The band, represented by the Sierra Legal Defence Fund, alleges the office breached B.C.'s Environmental Assessment Act in approving the mine, being built on a

mountainside 85 kilometres southwest of Houston.

If the court grants the band everything it wants, the project would grind to a halt, said Karen Wristen, a staff lawyer with the Sierra defence fund.

But even if it directs the office to re-examine certain steps of the assessment process, the court may decide mine construction should continue, Wristen said.

"If we speculate that the court finds in favor of Sierra Legal Defence and that the government erred or omitted something under the Environmental Assessment Act, I would hope that would not be sufficient to shut down the operation," said Peter Campbell, environmental affairs manager for Princeton Mining Corp., which owns 60 per cent of Huckleberry.

In July, the court rejected the Cheslatta band's request for a temporary halt to construction of the mine until the petition could be heard.

However remote the chances are that construction will be halted, the Oct. 29 court date will mark the latest flare-up of a controversy that has dogged the Huckleberry project for years.

The 80-member Cheslatta band argues that tests conducted for acid rock drainage were inadequate, as were studies on the impact on wildlife.

The band has also sought a share of the mine's income,

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The Huckleberry open-pit copper mine, southwest of Houston, will employ 180 direct employees and 20 contract workers when production starts next September.

Up to 220 jobs will be created during the project's 16-month construction period.

The \$137-million mine is expected to produce about 65 million pounds of copper annually at a cash cost of 65 cents US a pound.

The property was first explored 34 years ago. While drilling a well in 1992, the property's owner stumbled on a separate deposit that tripled Huckleberry's reserves, making it feasible to mine.

— Paul Luke

claiming the project is on its traditional territory.

Company officials say there should never have been any environmental controversy, arguing the stir is more about native land claims than eco-impacts.

Princeton president Richard Faucher said Huckleberry was

the first mine proposal to be examined under the environmental assessment process.

The review was extended three times to ensure details were examined.

Campbell, who said the mine has been carefully and conservatively designed, alleged the controversy has been whipped up by a few non-native researchers employed

by the Cheslatta.

Many natives favor the project, he said.

"I don't think any operation can go through a process like this, put their plan on the table, and not have somebody who wants to question it," Campbell said.

"Somebody will look at it and say you haven't done enough."



Staff photo by David Clark

John Osterbrook at work on the mill building at the dogged-by-controversy Huckleberry mine.

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AGS-Huckleberry