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Proposed mine draws pushback from area residents

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Rushville, Ill. — As the application process moves forward for Grindstone Management, LLC's Littleton Mine, many area residents are calling on the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to shut the project down.

The proposed surface mining operation would cover 773 acres in northern Schuyler County, two miles east of Littleton, Ill.

At a public hearing held by the IDNR on Wednesday evening, several attendees requested the application's denial, due to Grindstone Management's affiliation with the embattled Industry Mine of Schuyler and McDonough counties, which is reported to have committed at least 625 violations of the Clean Water Act between 2004 and 2011.

"We know that Grindstone Management is an entity that's linked to other entities which do control other surface coal mining operations," said Traci Barkley, a water resources scientist for the Prairie Rivers Network. "It's well-known that there's a tie between Grindstone Management and the Industry Mine. I think it's important to understand that there is a request for summary judgment that's been submitted to the Illinois Pollution Control Board by our state's attorney general, in that there is a lot of information about how many violations have been racked up at the Industry Mine."

Greg Arnett, the owner of Black Nugget, LLC, which would operate the Littleton Mine, admitted the failings of the Industry Mine, but lauded recent improvement efforts.

"(Between 2007 and 2011) there were 8,220 (water quality) tests performed – 8,026 compliant with current accepted discharge standards," Arnett said. "This works out to 97.6 percent compliance.

"Is 97.6 percent compliance perfection? No. It's not. It isn't. Is the permit holder working with IEPA (Illinois Environmental Protection Agency) to rectify this problem? Absolutely."

Many residents of the area immediately surrounding the mine complained that its operation would generate noise, disturb wildlife, damage roads and reduce property values.

IDNR Supervisor Scott Fowler explained that his department's area of legal authority in permit issuance covered a relatively narrow range of issues, and that many of these concerns would have to be brought to different government bodies.

"We think (these things) are very important to the community, and to people who live near the coal mine, but unfortunately ... (we have a) specific set of rules that we have to judge an application by," he said. "That's a very specific set of rules for coal mining from an environmental and coal mining standpoint.

"It doesn't encompass everything about the coal mining industry. All it does is look at environmental impacts, and reclamation of the coal mine at the end of its mining."

Fowler responded to each question raised at the meeting and identified a handful of hypothetical issues over which the IDNR could take action, but no substantive legal claim was raised against the proposed mine's operations.

The IDNR will continue to accept comments on the pending application until Thursday, July 23. Within the subsequent 60 days, the department will determine whether to issue, deny, or require modifications to the application.

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