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Greens won't sue to stop gold mine in SC

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Wetlands at proposed gold mine site in Lancaster County

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS — U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Some of South Carolina's most influential conservation groups won't oppose permits for an industrial-scale gold mine in Lancaster County under an agreement they struck to protect 368 acres near the mine and provide \$4 million for future land preservation.

The deal, announced this week by mine owner Romarco Minerals of Canada, comes at the same time the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control issued a water quality permit that Romarco needs to dig the largest open-pit gold mine ever established in South Carolina.

This week's developments substantially improve chances the 2,600-acre mine will go forward without opposition from government regulators and South Carolina environmentalists.

While the conservation agreement prompted questions from one mining expert, environmentalists said the 368 acres to be protected in the Lynchess River area includes habitat for the Carolina Heelsplitter, a rare mussel found almost nowhere else but the Carolinas.

In exchange for Romarco protecting land, the S.C. Coastal Conservation League, the S.C. Wildlife Federation and the Conservation Voters of South Carolina have agreed not to sue to stop pending environmental permits the project needs to get started. The Winyah Rivers Foundation and the National Wildlife Federation also signed off on the accord, negotiated by the Southern Environmental Law Center.

Approvals still needed to dig for gold in Lancaster County include a state mining permit and a federal wetlands permit. The federal permit, to fill about 120 acres of wetlands, could not be issued without the water quality approval given Tuesday by DHEC. All told, Romarco's mine could affect up to 1,100 acres of wetlands, a massive amount even in a soggy state such as South Carolina.

The land protection agreement is significant because it addresses questions about Romarco's previous wetlands offset proposal. In return for a federal wetlands permit, the company had offered to protect nearly 700 acres near the gold mine and another 3,700 acres in lower Richland County along the Wateree River in another watershed. Federal regulators don't typically approve wetlands offset plans outside of areas where wetlands are to be filled.

Now, the company has offered another 368 acres closer to the mine site. The property is in addition to the 3,700 acres in Lower Richland. It also brings to about 1,000 acres the amount of land being protected near the gold mine.

"The company strongly believes that industry can and should work cooperatively with the conservation community for not only the creation of jobs and economic benefit but also for the protection of environmentally sensitive areas," Romarco's chief executive officer, Diane

Garrett, said in a news release. "We are pleased that this agreement will provide long term economic and environmental benefits to the local community and the State."

The company has had little sustained opposition to the mine in Lancaster County in large part because of the jobs Romarco has promised for the economically depressed area near Kershaw. The company has estimated that building and running the mine could generate as many as 800 jobs, with several hundred permanent positions at the mine.

Glenn Miller, a University of Nevada Reno professor who follows gold mining issues, said the protection of 368 acres may be important, but he questioned whether environmentalists were paying too much attention to wetlands and not enough to pollution concerns associated with mines. Gold mines have the potential to release acid and metals into creeks.

"It is unwise for environmental organizations to allow an offset to occur when it deals only with one problem," Miller said.

Chris DeScherer, an attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, said his group remains concerned about gold mines in South Carolina, but "we believe that the additional land conservation made possible by this agreement has the potential to do a lot of good in the Lynches River watershed – where the mine will be located. Gold mining is a serious activity, and we remain committed to monitoring the mine as it moves forward."

Romarco Minerals wants to establish the 2,600-acre mine on a 4,500-acre site at the historic Haile gold mine outside the town of Kershaw. Smaller-scale mining at the site dates to the early 1800s, but Romarco plans to dramatically expand mining to find microscopic pieces of gold buried deep in rock. One of the company's eight mining pits will be 840 feet deep, one of the deepest holes ever believed to have been dug in South Carolina.

The land to be protected is owned by Romarco in the Flat Creek area of the Lynches River watershed, which is near the Forty-Acre Rock state nature preserve.

Romarco will donate the 368 acres it owns for protection to a land conservation group, according to the deal. The property includes federally designated critical habitat for the rare Carolina Heelsplitter mussel, conservationists said. The Heelsplitter, a federally listed endangered species, is found in just a few areas of the world, mostly in the Carolinas between Greenwood and Charlotte.

In addition, the deal with Romarco will provide \$4 million to a newly formed board that can spend the money to protect more land in the Lynches River watershed.

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