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Kennecott proposing expansion of huge Bingham Canyon copper mine in Utah

By Associated Press

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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Kennecott Utah Copper Corp. is proposing an expansion of its Bingham Canyon mine that would extend its life to 2034.

The Salt Lake Tribune reported Monday that the company is asking regulators to allow it to excavate about 1,000 feet from the south wall and deepen the massive mine by another 300 feet to reach 700 million more tons of copper ore.

"Kennecott has a great history in Utah, and this mine expansion offers an opportunity for us to continue producing about a quarter of the country's copper for years to come," CEO Kelly Sanders said.

The expansion, called the Cornerstone Project, would keep 2,000 jobs and prevent a five-year shutdown beginning in 2016, Sanders said.

The open-pit mine is about 20 miles southwest of Salt Lake City. It began operations in 1906 and has reduced an 8,000-foot mountain to a giant hole 2 1/2 miles wide.

Kennecott's work force in Utah might even expand as the company ramps up its fleet of ore-hauling trucks and adds an in-pit crusher and supporting equipment at its huge concentrator, which separates the copper and other valuable minerals from rock.

Removing the waste rock covering the ore will take seven years, but before that, it could take two years to evaluate the project and get approval from the board of directors of Kennecott's parent company, Rio Tinto. Kennecott will need to update about 25 of its 70 primary environmental permits.

Kennecott officials already have briefed the state Department of Environmental Quality about their intentions. Each permit adjustment will require public hearings, said Doug Bacon, a project manager in the department's Division of Environmental Response and Remediation.

"Based on my discussions with them, they're planning to actively engage the public outside of the standard permitting process," Bacon said. "They plan to go out and talk to communities, the neighborhoods and pull together stakeholder interest groups."

Information from: The Salt Lake Tribune, <http://www.sltrib.com>