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Kennecott

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Kennecott Utah Copper's Bingham Canyon open-pit mine is the largest man-made excavation on Earth, the work of tens of thousands of miners and machines for more than a century. From the overlook at the visitors center, rock trucks the size of houses look like little yellow ants marching up the haul road. And, if regulators approve and the board of directors is willing, the hole will get deeper, the trucks will seem smaller, and one of Utah's most reliable employers will stay in business for an additional 13 years.

The mine was slated to close in 2021. More than 2,000 jobs and a \$900 million-per-year contribution to the state's economy would have been lost. And, in times like these, the importance of those jobs becomes crystal clear.

Now, the company, which produces about 25 percent of the copper mined in the United States at Bingham Canyon, hopes to dig deeper, expanding the mine to reach a new ore deposit and remain in business through at least 2034. The move is conditional on the acquisition of permits and the approval of the board of Rio Tinto, Kennecott's owner.

Some folks will rightly have mixed emotions about the proposal. After all, Kennecott already contributes to the summer ozone and winter particulates that choke the Salt Lake Valley. And, because the company will be working a lesser deposit of ore, more must be mined in order to maintain production levels, creating the potential for even more pollution.

But the jobs are essential, the economic impact substantial, and the proposal will be subjected to stringent environmental standards.

Cheryl Heying, director of Utah's Division of Air Quality, promises a "rigorous" review. The company will need to update about 25 of its 70 primary environmental permits, and a separate public hearing will be held for each permit request, giving the public plenty of opportunity to comment. Plus, Kennecott is reaching out to environmentalists in what seems like a genuine attempt to hear and address their concerns.

At the same time, it is essential that the company continue its commitment to reduce its impact on the environment, and that regulators carefully review the permit requests and closely monitor mining to protect Utah's air, land and water, which have been devastated by irresponsible mining in the past.

Hard-rock mining is a big part of the history of the Salt Lake Valley. As long as Kennecott continues to play by the rules, it can be part of our future as well.

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