

Deseret News

Great Salt Lake land swap would aid state, officials say

By Stephen Speckman

Deseret News

Published: December 10, 2008

State officials say an exchange of land on the north side of Great Salt Lake with a private mineral company would help preserve an area that would benefit wildlife and allow the state to deal away land with less wildlife value.

Great Salt Lake Minerals Corp. announced the land-swap proposal on Tuesday. But critics say the deal would leave a permanent footprint on the lake and that more science-based research is needed before the state approves the exchange.

The company wants to trade old undeveloped leases on 30,000 acres with lower mineral concentrations for 37,000 acres on the northwest arm of the lake adjacent to its current operations. Great Salt Lake Minerals manufactures potash fertilizer by using evaporation ponds, operations that yield royalties for state coffers.

The proposal was discussed Tuesday by the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget's Resource Development Coordination Committee. The public now has 30 days to comment on the proposal. After that, the State Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands will decide whether to approve the proposal. Then there will be a 45-day appeals period before the state issues a final decision.

Lynn de Freitas, executive director of the Salt Lake City-based conservation group Friends of Great Salt Lake, said her group and others will likely run the full "gauntlet" of the commenting and appeals process. She said the state is forced by law to negotiate

requests for lease exchanges that can lead to bad or uninformed decisions regarding the lake's ecosystem.

"It's another example of how we're making huge permanent decisions about the lake bed for which we don't have a scientific basis to make the best decisions," de Freitas said.

She said that stakeholders in the first meeting Tuesday of the state's newly formed Great Salt Lake Advisory Council talked about the need to define what the "health" of the lake means and then make decisions about the lake's ecosystem based on that definition.

Kansas-based Compass Minerals, which owns Great Salt Lake Minerals, said that the proposed land exchange would leverage the company's "advantageous" location on the lake.

"These 37,000 acres of leases in an area well-suited for solar evaporation provide a future route to increase production of our all-natural, organic-approved sulfate of potash specialty fertilizer as demand dictates," Compass' president and chief executive officer Angelo Brisimitzakis said in a statement Tuesday.

Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands director Dick Buehler said Tuesday that his agency has followed all policies and procedures to the "nth" degree. He said some Utah environmentalists don't want any impact in or around the lake, despite a lake management plan and a state leasing plan that allows for industrial activity.

Buehler said Great Salt Lake Minerals scaled back its original request for 52,000 acres and is giving up land more valuable to the state.

"The areas where the current leases are that they're giving up have more wildlife values, according to the Division of Wildlife Resources, than the area they're proposing to lease in the northwest part of the lake," Buehler said.

Great Salt Lake Minerals has held the unused leases that it is proposing to exchange since 1967. By adding the land in the proposal, the company would boast a 70,000-acre operation consisting mostly of evaporation ponds on the north side of the lake.

E-mail: sspeckman@desnews.com

© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved