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EPA backs finding that proposed mine would hurt Alaska salmon runs

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WASHINGTON --]

The Environmental Protection Agency says the proposed Pebble Mine in Alaska could wipe out nearly 100 miles of streams and 4,800 acres of wetlands in one of the last places remaining in the world to support huge runs of wild salmon.

The EPA released its revised study Friday after considering an independent scientific review and 233,000 public comments. The new study backs the EPA's earlier finding that the proposed mine could do great damage in the Bristol Bay region of Alaska, home of the world's richest sockeye salmon fishery.

The EPA asserts that it has the power under the federal Clean Water Act to shut down the possibility of the massive copper and gold mine. The agency won't say whether it plans to do so or to take any other action.

"EPA has made no decision about if or how it might use our authorities under the Clean Water Act or other laws to protect Bristol Bay," EPA regional administrator Dennis McLerran said in a call with reporters.

McLerran said there would be another round of independent scientific review and public comments on the study before a final version was released by the end of the year.

The mine developers blasted the study, saying it's biased and doesn't truly reflect how the mine would operate.

"While we need to review the document in detail, it seems the EPA has not changed its deeply flawed approach of creating and evaluating a completely hypothetical mine plan, instead of waiting until a real, detailed mine plan is submitted to regulators as part of a complete permit application," said Pebble Partnership CEO John Shively.

The EPA's McLerran said the study was based on modern mining techniques and preliminary Pebble mine plans submitted to federal and state agencies. That includes a report that Northern Dynasty Minerals, which is among the companies with a stake in the mine, filed in 2011 with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The EPA study said that up to 90 miles of streams could be lost. Twenty-two of those miles are streams known to provide spawning or rearing habitats for coho salmon, sockeye salmon, chinook salmon and Dolly Varden trout. Altered stream flow could reduce habitat in another 34 miles of streams, the EPA said.

The study also said 4,800 acres of wetlands could be lost, harming the habitat for salmon and other fish.

Environmental groups said the study confirmed a need for the EPA to take action to protect Bristol Bay.

"The science is clear: Developing Pebble Mine will harm salmon and destroy streams even if nothing ever goes wrong at the mine," said Tim Bristol, the director of Trout Unlimited's Alaska Program.

Pebble advocates argue that mining and fishing can coexist in the Bristol Bay area and that the project would bring badly needed jobs. The Pebble Partnership says the deposit is one of the largest of its kind in the world, with the potential to produce 80.6 billion pounds of copper, 107.4 million ounces of gold and 5.6 billion pounds of molybdenum – which is used to make stainless steel – over the next three decades.

"We have spent the better part of 10 years working on designing a development plan for a mine at the Pebble deposit utilizing some of the premier mining engineers and environmental scientists in the world. The EPA has spent two short years on a desktop exercise," CEO Shively said.

EPA said the study was an effort to have the best science possible on the impacts of the proposed mine.

"This document is intended to help educate future decision-making in protecting Bristol Bay, be a resource in the public dialogue and a resource for future governmental decisions that might be made," McLerran said.

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