

MINEWATCH VOLUNTEERS

As many of you know, officials with Usibelli Coal Mine, Inc. have said the company does not intend to do any preliminary mining activity on Wishbone Hill this year. That is good news. But it does not mean that there is nothing for MineWatch volunteers to do. We can trust, but we also need to verify. If you see Usibelli on site, record that information. There are also important observations you can make to compare statements made in the mining permit, which was written nearly 25 years ago, against real life situations on the ground as they exist today. In addition, it will be helpful to have information about what activities occur in the area, both activities of the public as well as Usibelli.

Record everything you see even if it seems to have nothing to do with mining.

Record observations of hikers, ATV riders, horseback riders—whatever you observe. In addition, record whatever animals you see—moose, bears, porcupines, birds. It might be helpful for us, especially for public relations use, to have a baseline of activity prior to possible mining activity.

Look for eagles and eagle nests.

Even though it is no longer listed as an endangered species, the bald eagle is protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The Act basically prohibits interference with eagles or their nests. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommends that distances be maintained between nests and activities that would disturb the eagles (this would include mining activity) and that certain activities should be avoided during the nesting season, which is March through August. In 2009, a nest survey was prepared for Usibelli, which stated that during the observation period, which was one hour on May 5, 2009, no bald eagle nests were observed within the Wishbone Hill project area. However, an eagle nest was observed at the confluence of Moose Creek and the Matanuska River. An unidentified raptor nest was observed 0.2 miles west of the project area.

If you see a large nest of any kind, record the approximate location as well as you can.

Look for fish in Moose Creek and Buffalo Creek.

In an update to the mining permit application in 2008, Usibelli conducted a study of Moose Creek and concluded that “general habitat conditions within the Moose Creek and Buffalo Creek study area are not presumed to have greatly changed during the last 20 years. However, recent restoration and habitat improvement efforts in the past 3 years by the Chickaloon Tribe have undoubtedly produced greater habitat access and availability to salmon, trout, Dolly Varden, and other resident fish.”

In fact, we know the habitat has improved and that fish are reaching ever more upstream locations. Chickaloon Village has conducted fish counts, which verify increased populations in Moose Creek. Salmon have been observed in the lower reaches of Buffalo Creek, causing the creek to be designated as an anadromous stream, which means Usibelli will need a fish habitat permit from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in order to use water from Buffalo Creek for mining activities.

To add to our knowledge about fish populations, any observations of salmon or other fish in Moose Creek and especially in Buffalo Creek should be recorded. Try to record approximate numbers and species of fish observed.

Note whether water levels in the creeks seem high or low, especially in Buffalo Creek, and note large water withdrawals.

We are interested in how much water is flowing in Buffalo Creek in this rather dry summer. Also we are aware that a gravel company on Buffalo Mine Road is withdrawing water from one of the Moose Creek feeders. If you see evidence of that sort of activity, record it—even though it is not strictly related to Usibelli. Large water withdrawals could have an effect on how much water is available to Usibelli.

Record observations of heavy equipment.

Usibelli says that it plans to use the machinery now located at the intersection of the access road and the Glenn Highway to haul trees to the highway so that the wood can be used by the public. The trees were downed a few years ago.

In addition, it appears that Granite Construction is using the entrance to the mine road in its work on the Glenn Highway.

All observations of equipment and especially the use of the equipment should be recorded.

Record noise observations.

While you are in the area, record any noises you hear from Buffalo Mine Road. This includes motors, dogs barking, kids playing. While it may not be true that noise will carry in both directions to the same degree—that is, from the road to the site and from the site to the road, it may still be useful to know how sound carries in the area.

If you see anything that looks like evidence of early Native use of the area or evidence of earlier mining activity, record your observations.

Usibelli acknowledges that the mine site area was important to the Dena'ina and Ahtna people and states that the most likely place to recover cultural resources is the bluff edge and on the banks of Moose Creek near the old Premier Mine site (approximately mile 3.3 of Buffalo Mine Road). The company contends that past mining activity has destroyed any trace of cultural resources. If you happen to see anything that could be evidence of historical activity, take pictures and record the location. It may seem unlikely to find such resources because many people have passed through the area before you, but ATVers and hunters are not ordinarily looking for artifacts. You are.

We also want evidence of prior mining activity. We are aware of the locations of some remnants of old mines and the old railroad line, but information is sketchy. The approximate location of remnants of old machinery, railroad ties, tailing piles, excavations, etc. should be recorded.

Note the condition of the current mine road—or pioneer trail, as Usibelli has called it.

What shape is the road in? What sort of vehicle could navigate it? Is it washed out anywhere?

If mining activity begins, and we're hoping it won't, roadwork may happen first.

If roadwork begins, we will have much to watch for. Requirements for road construction are set out both in the mining permit and in the borough lease. Both require the road meet rather stringent conditions so the building of the road will be a serious project. In addition, the permit and the air quality permit both set out requirements for public access to the area and the rerouting of one of the trails. If work were to begin on the road, we will outline these requirements in detail.

For now, just observe whether anything that looks like road building is occurring. Above all, this would include surveying activity.

Record your observations to the best of your ability. Do not hesitate to record something that might be insignificant.

One thing we have learned over the years is that a fact that seems unimportant at the time may become important later. We prefer over-recording to under-recording. Reporting a negative is also important. If you observe nothing at all, record that.

Also, though, record only what you know. If you do not know an eagle nest from a raptor nest or a squirrel nest, just say you saw a large nest but don't know what kind. If you note the location, we can send out someone who may be able to identify it. The same goes for fish. If you don't know the species, don't guess—describe it if you can. If you are not sure whether the rusted metal you see is part of an old mine or simply a part of a wrecked snow machine, don't worry. Just tell us about it. Nothing is insignificant.

Thank you for your willingness to help! Have a good hike.

