SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE
Gold Hill Reclamation and Mining, Inc. Mining Plan of Operations
Four Rivers Field Office

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to review and authorize a Mining Plan of Operations (MPO) in accordance the July 1988 Cascade Resource Management Plan (RMP) (USDI 1988).Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this report is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposal. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of July 15, 2012. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that meet the purpose of and need for the project.

Background

The 1872 Mining Law [30 United States Code (U.S.C.) 22 et seq.] states that a person has a statutory right consistent with other laws and Departmental regulations to go upon the open (unappropriated and unreserved) public land for the purpose of mineral prospecting, exploration, development and extraction.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 (Public Law 94-579) requires that the Secretary of the Interior regulates mining operations to prevent undue or unnecessary degradation of the public lands.

The Boise Basin is classified for intensive management of minerals. Areas of intensive management will emphasize "providing for mineral production while protecting important wildlife values, restoring water quality, and rehabilitating site productivity and stream stabilization through reclamation" (1988 Cascade Resource Management Plan Record of Decision [ROD], p. 20)

Purpose and Need for Action

Need

Gold Hill Reclamation and Mining, Inc. (Gold Hill) submitted on May 16, 2012, a MPO in accordance with the 1872 Mining Law. The 43 CFR 3809 Regulations (3809.411 (a) (3) (ii)) state that an environmental review, required under NEPA, is to be completed prior to approving mining operations proposed under a MPO.

Purpose

BLM will review the MPO submitted by Gold Hill and identify action alternatives. The action alternatives should meet the following objectives:

- Restore the landscape to its pre-mining topography
- Restore native vegetation
- Implement measures to protect public safety on haul roads

- Maintain hydrologic function in Granite Creek
- Maintain acceptable water quality in Granite Creek
- Maintain at current state or improve fisheries habitat in Granite Creek
- Improve slope/soil stability in proposed action area
- Comply with all federal, state, and local laws and regulations
- Provide for standard operating procedures and best management practices to prevent or mitigate undue and unnecessary degradation

Existing Condition

General

The Boise Basin is located 30-40 miles northeast of Boise, Idaho and is accessed by State Highway 21. It consists of private and State lands surrounded by Boise National Forest. Idaho City, the county seat of Boise County, is located 38 miles from Boise on Highway 21. Quartzburg lies 16 miles northwest of Idaho City in the northwest section of the Boise Basin along Granite Creek. The BLM manages those sections in the Boise Basin where the towns of Centerville, Placerville, Pioneerville, and Quartzburg were originally located (Map 1).

Lode gold mining began in the Quartzburg area in the late-1800s and continued into the 1930s. The mine dumps (stockpiled unconsolidated material) came from the Gold Hill Mine near Quartzburg and was placed both on the now-patented lode mining claims which encompass the town site of Quartzburg and on adjacent public lands to the south.

The material on public land was deposited on a west-facing slope with a natural angle of approximately 12 degrees. The stockpile is estimated at 36,000 tons, and ranges in thickness from 1 to 25 feet deep and encompasses an area of 1.1 acres (46,856 square feet).
The stockpile is adjacent to a gravel road that is the main access to Quartzburg (Map 2).

Air Quality

The existing air quality in the project area is typical of air quality in the surrounding forested areas. Dust is raised from traffic on the access road and similarly in most of the surrounding forested areas that contain gravel roads.

Cultural/Historic

The project area is in the northwest portion of the Boise Basin – an early gold mining region – adjacent to the townsite of Quartzburg.

Vegetation - Noxious Weeds/Invasive Species - Soils

Native plant communities surrounding the disturbance/reclamation area are Mountain Shrub and Conifer; native vegetation (from soil survey description) is Forest habitat type: “Douglas-fir / mallow ninebark-ponderosa pine phase”. The existing vegetation on the mine dump consists of only a few small ponderosa pines and Douglas-firs, and no herbaceous vegetation. Undisturbed surrounding areas support mountain shrub, grasses, forbs, and conifers.

Spotted knapweed and rush skeletonweed are present in the area. Spotted knapweed is a high priority (i.e. Early Detection Rapid Response/Control) noxious weed in the Four Rivers Field Office.

The surrounding topography is hilly and relatively steep, but soils in the area have low potential for erosion (low K-factors; 0.1 – 0.17). The area also has low potential for biological soil crusts.

Wildlife - Migratory Birds – Threatened, Endangered or Candidate Animal Species
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife web site lists the Canada lynx as threatened species in Boise County, but are no longer considered to have habitat within the Four Rivers field office.
Special status animals such as northern goshawk, flammulated owls, Lewis' woodpecker, Williamson's sapsucker, whiteheaded woodpecker, and calliope hummingbird inhabit forested, montane ecosystems on BLM lands and adjacent Forest Service lands. The proposed action should not disturb special status species during breeding seasons or during migration periods.

Wetlands/Riparian – Water Resources/Quality – Fisheries
Granite Creek is located across from the mine dump on BLM with Granite Creek Road separating the two. Granite Creek is currently in proper functioning condition.

Water quality in Granite Creek is good. Gold Hill has sampled and tested the water in Granite Creek semi-annually. Test analyses have shown no impacts to water quality.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife web site lists bull trout as a threatened species in Boise County and bull trout habitat is known to exist in Boise County, however, not in the Grimes Creek drainage which includes Granite Creek. Redband trout are present in Granite Creek within the Grimes Creek drainage. Fisheries resources are excellent in Granite Creek.

Lands/Access – Recreation – Visual Resources
The access to the proposed project area after leaving the county road is Granite Creek Road which is a one lane graveled road with turn outs. This portion of Granite Creek Road crosses USFS lands, then BLM lands (Map 2). A locked gate is in place on private land just past the private/BLM boundary (Map 2). Signs were posted on this road warning of large truck traffic when Gold Hill was hauling mine dump material from the private land (Quartzburg townsite) to be processed. The access road is otherwise available to the public for recreational purposes although they cannot continue onto the private lands.

Recreation in the area could include fishing, hiking, hunting, ATV- riding, picnicking and camping.

The mine dump on BLM represents a visual interruption of the surrounding natural landscape.

Proposed Action
Gold Hill Reclamation and Mining, Inc. (Gold Hill) is proposing, per their MPO, to excavate and haul unconsolidated rock material (mine dump or stockpile) placed on the surface during historical mining activities in the late-1800s and early-1900s. Gold Hill proposes to use a Caterpillar Dozer to push the material down slope into a live loading pile, where it would be loaded by a track-mounted excavator into six haul trucks and transported offsite. The haul trucks would loop on approximately 20-minute cycles. The material is currently sitting on a west facing slope with a natural angle of approximately 12 degrees.

The material would be removed down to the original paleo-surface/soil horizon. The soil underlying the existing pile would be left in place and remain undisturbed. Gold Hill would apply a BLM-approved seed mixture to the disturbed area and place wattling as needed to control erosion. The reseeding and erosion control measures would be performed by Groundfx, the same company responsible for reseeding and slope stabilization of Gold Hill's adjacent private property. An EPA-regulated Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) would be implemented that addresses water quality issues on Granite Creek.

The reclamation objectives of the site after the material is hauled away are to:

- Increase stability of the slopes and soil to ensure public safety and maintain acceptable water and fisheries quality in Granite Creek
- Promote the growth of re-introduced native vegetation that would blend with existing, undisturbed vegetation
- Prevent the introduction or spread of noxious weeds or invasive species
- Improve visual resources by restoring the land to its previous topography and natural vegetation

The removal portion of the project is estimated to take approximately fifteen (15) consecutive days and would take place sometime between July 1 and August 30, 2012. Reclamation would take an additional three days to complete. The site would be monitored until reclamation objectives are met.

Preliminary Issues

Air Quality

- Air quality could be impacted on a short-term basis from increased particulates as material is staged and loaded for hauling offsite and from increased truck traffic on Granite Creek Road

Cultural/Historic

- Items of historical importance could be un-earthed in the process of digging and loading the dump material

Vegetation - Noxious Weeds/Invasive Species – Soils

- Direct loss of native vegetation could occur if machinery strays from existing road(s) and/or beyond reclamation area (short-term); indirectly if introduced seeded grasses spread into adjacent plant communities (long-term)
- Introduced (non-native) seeded grasses could occupy the 1.1-acre reclamation area (shifts in community components from native to seeded/introduced species)
- Noxious weed populations could increase in number and size
- Weeds could invade seeded areas (long-term)
- Removal of the dump material would eliminate current rill erosion there; however, disturbance of the soil horizon in the original topography could result in increased rill erosion, accentuated waterflow paths, and pedestalled grasses

Wildlife – Migratory Birds – Threatened, Endangered or Candidate Animal Species

- Proposed activities could disturb animals during nesting, brood-rearing, and migration periods

Wetlands/Riparian – Water Resources/Quality – Fisheries

- Increased sediment in Granite Creek could affect water quality and fish spawning
- Temporary bank failures on Granite Creek could alter the hydrology and increase overland flow
- Reduction of current rill erosion could benefit water quality and fisheries habitat

Lands/Access – Recreation – Visual Resources

- Temporary road closures to accommodate heavy truck traffic could impact recreational activities
- Removal of the mine dump material and subsequent reclamation could eventually benefit visual resources

Preliminary Alternative Development

Since the proposed action is to remove stockpiled material in a discrete location, the only other alternative to the proposed action is a no-action alternative.

Decision to be Made

The Four Rivers Field Manager is the authorized officer (AO) responsible for minerals management decisions. Based on the NEPA analysis, the AO would issue a decision document that includes a determination of the environmental effects' significance and whether an environmental impact statement (EIS) would be required. If the AO determines that an EIS is not required, the AO would determine whether or not the MPO can be implemented. If the AO determines that the MPO can be implemented, he would also include any necessary terms, stipulations, standard operating procedures, or conditions of approval to mitigate any possible undue or unnecessary degradation of the public lands.

Public Input Needed

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by June 22, 2012 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA.

Written scoping comments must be submitted to Valerie J. Lenhartzen, Geologist, 3948 Development Avenue, Boise, ID 83705. Business hours for submitting hand-delivered comments are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in one of the following formats: email message, plain text (.txt), rich text (.rtf), Word (.doc), or portable document format (.pdf) to vlenhartzen@blm.gov with the title of this project in the subject line. E-mails submitted to addresses other than the one listed, in other formats than those listed, or containing viruses will be rejected.

Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Valerie J. Lenhartzen, Geologist, Four Rivers Field Office, (208) 384-3395.

MAPS:
Map 1. Regional Surface Management Agency Map
Map 2. Proposed Action Area