

Finding of No Significant Impact

Sterling Gold Mine Plan Amendment to Expand Open Pit & Process Operations

DOI-BLM-NV-S030–2014–0015; Case File N-71676

I have reviewed Environmental Assessment (EA) DOI-BLM-NV-S030–2014–0015; dated February, 2016. After consideration of the environmental effects as described in the EA, and incorporated herein, I have determined that the proposed action identified in the EA will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required to be prepared.

I have determined that the proposed action is in conformance with the approved Las Vegas Resource Management Plan, and is consistent with applicable plans and policies of county, state, tribal and Federal agencies. This finding and conclusion is based on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27), both with regard to the context and the intensity of impacts described in the EA.

Context:

The Sterling Gold Mine proposes to expand mining operations by mining areas within the vicinity of pre-existing mining operations to recover gold from ore which was previously uneconomic or undiscovered. Recent exploration has determined that previously unknown ore is located near the surface in the vicinity of the existing pits.

Sterling proposes to recover the resource by open-pit mining methods and heap leaching the ore. The proposed action would result in a net increase of 132.1 acres in disturbance from the existing operation of 162.8 acres, for a total of 294.9 acres. All disturbance would occur on public lands administered by the BLM. The life of the project is anticipated to include three years for active mining, an additional one year of continued heap leach operation and reclamation, and a fifth year to complete reclamation and closure.

Intensity:

1. *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

The proposed action would result in beneficial effects in continuation of existing jobs at the Sterling Mine, ending the layoffs that occurred when the existing underground ore deposit was mined out. Most of the workers would return to their jobs; with a mine staff of approximately 32 employees. The expansion by Sterling would have an additional 13 to 18 new jobs and increase the mine staff to 45 to 50 employees. Added economic benefits would accrue to the communities of Beatty, Amargosa Valley, and Pahrump during the construction phase of the mine expansion, as Sterling uses local contractors and vendors for most of their out-sourced work and supplies, respectively. The proposed action would also produce commodity goods for the US and global benefits.

If the proposed action is not approved the adverse impacts would result in the cessation of mining at Sterling Mine and the eventual loss of 32 to 50 mine-related jobs and this would be noticed especially in the small communities of Beatty and Amargosa Valley.

2. *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

The proposed action would have the typical occupational hazards associated with this type of project. Health and safety affects are minimized as Sterling is required to comply with BLM Surface Management Regulations 43 CFR 3809, the Mining and Mineral Policy Act of 1970 (as amended), the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, in order to use public lands managed by the BLM Southern Nevada District, Pahrump Field Office and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The BLM has reviewed the proposed action to ensure public health and safety is part of the proposed action. Public safety would be maintained throughout the duration of the project. Active mining areas would have earthen berms constructed five feet high approximately 30 feet from the pit edge. Security gates would remain in place around the mine site. Other than the occupational hazards that would be minimized with the safety measures, the Sterling Mine expansion is unlikely to impact public health and safety.

3. *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

A negative report for the cultural resources indicates no unique characteristics in the proposed action area. There are no park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas that would be affected by the proposed project.

4. *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be controversial.*

There are no known effects of the proposed action on the quality of the human environment that would be highly controversial with the approval of the Sterling Gold Mine plan amendment. The Sterling Mine has been operating without any concern or controversy for 30 years.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The EA has taken a comprehensive look and assessment of the proposed action design features and mitigation measures that would reduce, minimize and even eliminate risks for this project. Other agencies with jurisdiction for the Federal, State and local regulations have been involved in and approve the proposed action. The proposed action complies with Federal and State regulations. The EA has not revealed any uncertain, unique or unknown risks on the quality of the human environment that would be effected by the proposed action.

6. *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The proposed action does not establish a precedent for future actions. The proposed action is in conformance with the Las Vegas Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement and does not directly represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

The EA assessed the proposed action related to other actions and did not find any cumulative significant impacts.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

There are no known sites or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP that would be affected by the proposed project.

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.*

The Mojave Desert tortoise is the only listed species with the potential to occur within the Project area. The proposed action has a “may affect, likely to adversely affect” determination for the federally threatened desert tortoise and “no effect” for its designated critical habitat, as the Project is outside of this range.

Impacts to desert tortoise would be minimized by adhering to the terms and conditions of Programmatic Biological Opinion File No. 84320-2010-F-0365. In addition a tortoise exclusion fence would be constructed around the processing area. The Proposed Action will have no effect on any other federally protected species or designated critical habitat due to the absence of the species and/or habitat.

10. *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The proposed action does not violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed action and the EA were prepared in accordance with the following statutes and implementing regulations, policies, and procedures including but not limited to the following:

- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended (Public Law 91–190, 92 United States Code [USC] 4321 et seq.);
- 40 CFR 1500 et seq.: Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA;
- BLM NEPA Handbook (H-1790–1)(BLM 2008a);
- Federal Land Policy and Management Act, as amended Sections 103(c) and 501(a)(4);
- BLM Surface Management Regulations 43 CFR 3809;
- Mining and Mineral Policy Act of 1970;
- Nevada Division of Environmental Protection (NDEP), Bureau of Mining Regulation and Reclamation;
- Nevada Division of Environmental Protection (NDEP), Bureau of Water Pollution Control;
- Nevada Division of Environmental Protection (NDEP), Bureau of Air Pollution Control;
- Endangered Species Act (ESA); 16 United States Code §1531 et seq;
- National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 USC 40 et seq.); and

- Las Vegas Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (BLM 1998).

Signed:

Deborah J. MacNeill
Pahrump Field Manager

[Date]