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Tribe Prepares for Renewed Fight Over Gold Mine

By NICK MADIGAN

The only sound in the desert is a whistling wind, almost imperceptible. Chips of black volcanic basalt and white quartz mingle underfoot, like a jumbled, prehistoric chessboard. As afternoon falls, waves of sand turn to shimmering gold.

Standing on a small hill, Lorey Cachora, an archaeologist and member of the Quechan tribe, pointed to a path in the rocky terrain where his ancestors ran, sometimes for hundreds of miles, to deliver messages and trade with sister tribes south into Mexico and north along the Colorado River. Bending down, Mr. Cachora pointed to faint markings on a rock, and said they were made at least 7,000 years ago by Quechan storytellers, who wove powerful myths through “dream trails” and other spiritual tools.

It is here, on what is now federal property administered by the Bureau of Land Management, that Glamis Gold Ltd., a company with mining operations in Nevada, California, Mexico and Honduras, wants to dig a 1,600-acre, open-pit gold mine. The company’s eight-year effort gained ground two months ago when the Bush administration reversed a ruling by Bruce Babbitt, President Bill Clinton’s interior secretary, that digging such a mine would irreparably harm the environment of the Quechan ancestral lands.

“We’re going to fight until the end on this,” said Mike Jackson, 54, the president of the Quechan Tribal Council.

Mr. Jackson, sitting in his office at the Fort Yuma Indian Reservation, 14 miles southeast of the proposed mine at Indian Pass, said he had tried to arrange a meeting with Interior Secretary

Gale A. Norton to express tribal opposition to the mine, to no avail. “Gale Norton really needs to meet with us,” he said. “If she doesn’t listen, we’re headed for a meltdown. Right now, across the country, all tribal nations are very disappointed in the Bush administration. Nobody’s history should be destroyed. Putting this mine here would be like putting a McDonald’s on the South Lawn of the White House.”

Ms. Norton suggested in an interview in The New York Times in November that the decision to rescind the Babbitt order was part of an effort to counteract the Clinton administration’s pro-environment tilt. “Many of the things that we have done are to put in place common-sense approaches that we feel are a better balance,” Ms. Norton said.

Mark Pfeifle, a department spokesman, said that the Babbitt order denying permission to mine at Indian Pass had sprung from “baseless legal reasonings.” Nevertheless, Mr. Pfeifle said, a Bureau of Land Management official told Mr. Jackson and the tribe’s lawyer, Courtney Ann Coyle, that Ms. Norton’s retraction of the Babbitt order was simply one step in a long process and that the bureau had yet to decide whether Glamis Gold had a valid claim.

“Once that’s done, it would be at that point in time that the economic concerns, the environmental concerns and the spiritual concerns would be evaluated,” Mr. Pfeifle said. “We’re committed to working and listening and cooperating with the American Indians and hearing their concerns.”

David Hyatt, vice president of investor relations at Glamis, said the company was willing to alter its plans out of respect for the tribe. “We’ve offered to move some of our waste stockpiles to accommodate these trails of dreams and whatnot,” Mr. Hyatt said. “We certainly understand their feelings. We’ve tried to sit down with the tribe, but each time they and the antimining groups change

their demands. What they don't understand is that miners are just as much environmentalists as they are. We don't want to destroy the environment where we live and work.”

Speaking from Reno, Nev., Mr. Hyatt said that, in any event, the Quechan ancestral landscape was already scarred by railroads, highways, power transmission lines and pipelines, although there are none of those intrusions at Indian Pass, where the only evidence of modern man is a row of mining-claim stakes driven into the ground in the midst of creosote shrubs, cholla cactus and cat's claw trees.

For at least 10 years, about 150 miners would toil in three open pits, each as deep as 850 feet. Two pits would be filled in after mining, but the third would be left open.

“It's not cost-effective to fill in the last hole when you're done mining,” said Mr. Hyatt, whose company this year expects to reap about 225,000 ounces of gold -- worth some \$70 million -- from its various mines.

Thirty-one members of Congress, including Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein of California, signed a Dec. 6 letter to Ms. Norton saying that the “unmitigable environmental and cultural impacts” of the proposed mine required denial. They wrote that Mr. Babbitt's decision to stop the project was based on a public review process lasting five years and an exhaustive study of the social, cultural, economic and environmental consequences of the plan.

Ms. Coyle, the Quechan lawyer in San Diego, said she was troubled by the administration's willingness to roll back rulings long in the making. “When can anyone ever rely on the decision of a government when a succeeding administration can reach back in time and undo that decision?” she asked. “It raises a lot of serious

questions about how this government feels about Native American sovereignty.”

The Quechan, who number about 3,000, held most of this territory as recently as the 1800’s, when they had some 880 square miles. Their reservation now is about 45,000 acres, much of it unsullied desert, although there are several mines, some dating back to gold-rush days in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In Winterhaven, a down-at-the-heels, one-strip town with two liquor stores, a closed nightclub and a senior center, the prospect of an economic revival stemming from a new mine was not enough to make some of the locals go along.

Mr. Jackson, the tribal president, said it was crucial to preserve the past etched in the land so that it could be passed down.

“Since time immemorial, no one has touched it,” Mr. Jackson said. “It’s a pristine area and we just want to keep it that way.”