

Oak Flat Factsheet

The Save Oak Flat Act in the House (HR 1884) currently has 102 cosponsors and the Senate version (S 915) has 7 cosponsors. With such a large number of Members supporting the protection of Oak Flat, Congress should move forward and get it done this year.

Oak Flat is a sacred, recreational, and ecological haven on public land in the Tonto National Forest, of Arizona, an hour east of Phoenix.

Resolution Copper, (wholly owned by the world's two largest mining companies, Rio Tinto and BHP) is proposing a very large underground copper mine that would create immense damage. The copper would be sold as concentrate and would be shipped overseas for processing into finished products. There are only 3 operating copper smelters in the US and these smelters already have more product than they can handle.

The Tonto National Forest released a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) in January of 2021, but promptly rescinded it in March, 2021. The FEIS was rescinded because it was not complete, but it still details some of the harm the mine will cause. The proposed Resolution Copper Mine would:

- Create a crater roughly two miles wide and 1,000 feet deep right there at Oak Flat due to surface subsidence.
- Dump nearly 1.4 billion tons of toxic mining waste into an unlined tailings dump -- the preferred alternative tailings site will ultimately cover six square miles with a dam 490 feet high.
- Use more water annually than the City of Tempe, AZ, a minimum of 50,000 acre-feet per year.
- Permanently destroy about 16,000 acres of public land, state trust land, and private land.

The project is fatally flawed for numerous reasons. Some of these are:

Water

In short, water is so scarce in Arizona that we don't have enough for both this proposed project and for our communities and the environment.

- Arizona is in the 25th year of continuous drought and scientists show that it's the worst drought Arizona has seen in 1,200 years.
- The proposed mine would seriously diminish water supplies for the town of Superior
- Water pumping by the mine would lower the water table significantly where the proposed mega-city of Superstition vistas is planned.
- The mine's water use would impact the water supply for Pinal County farmers who are already strapped for water.
- The water pumping would imperil at least 16 springs at Oak Flat that are critical for religious practices, wildlife, and for recreation.
- The Colorado River is dangerously close to "dead pool" in both Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Dead pool means that no more water will pass through Glen Canyon Dam or Hoover Dam. Much of Arizona is dependent on water from the Colorado River.
- We are already in a mandated "Tier-2" shortage declaration on the Colorado River and the Federal Government is likely to impose even harsher Colorado River water restrictions in the near-term. This places greater stress on our groundwater resources, which are already stressed.

Climate Change

Resolution Copper is desperately attempting to greenwash their proposed experiment by saying their Resolution mine project is critical for combating climate change, the exact opposite is true.

- Mining creates at least 10% of the world's greenhouse gasses just for extracting minerals from the earth. When you add the greenhouse gasses produced to refine and transport these minerals, the total is at least 20%. How can an industry that produces that much climate change be our climate savior?
- There is no shortage of copper from projects that don't create as much damage as this proposal would. The [International Copper Study Group World Copper Factbook](#) for 2020 states:

“Since 1960, there has always been, on average, 38 years of reserves and significantly greater amounts of known resources. In addition, recycling, innovation, and mining exploration continue to contribute to the long-term availability of copper ... Despite increased demand for copper produced from ore in recent years, increases in reserves have grown, and there is more identified copper available to the world than at any other time in history.”
- The climate impacts of biodiversity loss and destruction caused by mining could effectively **cancel out** any benefits in terms of the climate mitigation enabled by increased renewable capacity delivered through an unplanned, business-as-usual scenario of transition mineral mining expansion.
- BHP, the minority owner of Resolution Copper shut down a mine at San Manuel in Arizona that, when it closed, was the largest producing underground mine in the US. The mine still has 30 years of copper left underground. If BHP, and by association, Resolution Copper, truly cared about producing copper for the US in a socially acceptable manner, they would reopen the San Manuel mine and finish mining there before attempting to destroy Oak Flat.
- We simply cannot mine our way out of climate change.

Protection of Sacred sites

In May of 2021, Rio Tinto knowingly blew up sacred rock shelters in the Juukan Gorge in western Australia that have been used for religious purposes for 46,000 years. With that kind of track record, what more do we need to know about Rio Tinto's attitude toward the protection of sacred sites? In response, Rio Tinto's CEO stated that Rio Tinto would “never again” destroy a sacred site anywhere in the world. As destroying Oak Flat is in Resolution Copper's mining plan, one would think that Rio Tinto's would have already abandoned the project.

Failed Experiment

For all the reasons mentioned above, and setting aside the legal permits Resolution Copper should not be able to obtain, it should be impossible for Resolution Copper to obtain the critical social license to mine at Oak Flat. Rio Tinto and BHP have both promised to adhere to the international standards for Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from Native Americans and nearby residents. As both have clearly said NO to the project, that should end the project. What is more likely, Resolution Copper will try to bully their way into obtaining “consent” something completely contrary to the spirit of FPIC.

There is another hurdle that Resolution Copper cannot overcome and that is that the proposed project just will not work.

- Rio Tinto cannot finish building the only similar mine (but 2,000 feet less deep) in Mongolia. The toxic tailings dump for that mine, which is the same design as what they propose at Oak Flat began to leak only 3 years after its completion.
- The #10 test shaft Resolution copper dug at Oak Flat encountered a 185-degree river of hot water at 6,300 feet below ground, while Resolution Copper's hydrologists said that no water would be encountered below 4,500 feet. This river of hot water has already led to enormous cost overruns to treat this polluted water and to cool the shaft.
- No one has constructed a block cave mine as large or as deep as the Resolution Copper proposal.
- Rio Tinto is so concerned about the project that they have paid a Canadian firm \$17 million to conduct a feasibility study to determine whether mining is even possible. Shouldn't they know if the mine is even feasible before giving them our public land?

Conclusion

To attempt such a risky project at such a precious place as Oak Flat is unconscionable, especially when its owners have other options. Congress should pass the Save Oak Flat act to end the project now and for good! The agencies should deny permits for the proposed project and the court should rule the project illegal.