



Photo by Nikolai Ivanoff

SNAKE RIVER VALLEY — After a three-month review, the Army Corps of Engineers reinstated a modified wetlands permit for Alaska Gold Company’s Rock Creek mine located on the slopes of Mt. Brynteson in the Snake River Valley.

The Nome Nugget

Alaska’s Oldest Newspaper

• USPS 598-100 • Single Copy Price • 50 Cents in Nome •

VOLUME CVII NO. 10 MARCH 8, 2007



Photo by Diana Haecker

HONORARY MUSHER— Tekla Monson, daughter of the late Susan Butcher, was the honorary musher, wearing bib number 1, during the ceremonial start of the 35th Iditarod last Saturday in Anchorage. Driving the sled with her is her father, Butcher’s husband Dave Monson.

Iditarod XXXV: Off to a cold start

By Diana Haecker

A field of 82 Iditarod mushers began their 1,200-mile long journey from Willow to Nome in earnest on Sunday starting at 2 p.m.

Every two minutes, dog teams were unleashed and shot out of the starting chute, past throngs of people waving and screaming, across Willow Lake until the trail disappeared into the trees and took the mushers out of sight. The \$785,000 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog race is on its way.

Sunny skies made for a perfect family outing day. The official start was a welcome reason for a party, complete with barbecues set up and the smell of burning wood and roasted sausages carried by a stiff breeze all across the lake.

It was going to be a cold night, that first night of Iditarod 35.

The National Weather Service forecasted lows of -45°F for the mushers nearing the Alaska Range.

And in a way, the weather already claimed the first casualty.

Funky weather that left Alaskan trails hard as cement and unforgiving caused the first giant to fall. On Monday, news reached mushing fans that Montana musher Doug Swingley had scratched after a

crash that left him injured with possible broken ribs and a dislocated thumb. Swingley, who has won the race four times and came in second last year, scratched in Puntilla Lake checkpoint. “We don’t know what happened,” said Iditarod spokesman Chas St. George. “There was glaciated ice on a sidehill trail and Swingley lost control.” At press time on Monday night, St. George said that Swingley himself isn’t really sure what happened and that he’s still trying to jog his memory. St. George said that no dogs were injured in the accident. Swingley decided to scratch at 12:36 p.m. on Monday.

Mushing experts in the press had focused on The Gang of Four — Martin Buser, Jeff King, Doug Swingley and Robert Sorlie— now narrowed down to the Gang of Three. But one should not forget about a field of solid teams that are just vying for the “big” guys to make a mistake and be there to bust a move.

The \$785,000-Iditarod has lots of dark horses, and the trail this year will make or break a team. It broke Swingley already.

After a winter with good snow coverage, a freak warm spell across

Alaska thawed snowy trails. As temperatures dropped down below freezing again, the trails compacted and resembled ice rinks more than mushing trails. There was not much snow to speak of after the big thaw. While this affected the whole state, the handicap regarding training was equally shared by most Alaskan mushers. Now it’s a matter of who will escape injuries the best, either through luck or ice skating abilities.

After the ceremonial start in Anchorage, mushers were ready to move on and get going with the real thing. “It’s time to go,” summed up Kotzebue musher Louis Nelson, Sr., as he was waiting at the parking lot with his son Darin. Nelson drew bib number 49. Just next to him was his nephew John Baker, with start number 48, who quietly attached a snow hook rope to his self-designed-and-built sled. Baker seemed calm, collected and confident as ever. A few spots away from Baker was Akiak’s Mike Williams, bib number 43, who showed race official Art Church his mandatory gear: trail mail, cooker, sleeping bag, booties, snow shoes. All there. “It’s been hard getting here,” said Williams. “But once we get going, it’s gonna be good. I hope

continued on page 6

Corps reinstates Rock Creek wetland permit

By Diana Haecker

Last week the Army Corps of Engineers announced that they intend to reissue the section 404 wetlands permit for Alaska Gold Company’s Rock Creek mine.

“After a thorough re-evaluation of the application and decision document, Corps officials determined that the Alaska Gold Company’s permit is consistent with applicable laws and regulations,” reads the Corp’s press release.

“Based on its own independent analysis, which considered information provided by the permit applicant and involved coordination with the State of Alaska’s Large Mine Team, the Corps reached a finding of no significant impact in its environmental assessment,” the Corps’ press release said.

Changes to the original wetlands

permit include a reduction in wetland destruction acreage from 414.5 acres to 346.5 after errors in the permit application drawings were discovered that marked uplands as wetlands.

The Corps’ press release highlights the Gold Company’s plans to reestablish fish and wildlife habitat along Big Hurrah by using the historical mine tailings for their project.

“Alaska Gold will retrieve mine tailings that historically were disposed of in stream channels and use the material for road construction and other work associated with the project. Then the company will re-contour these stream channels to a more natural condition,” said the Corps’ release. However, the method of destroying vegetation

continued on page 4



Photo by Nancy McGuire

ALL DRESSED UP—Karena Bartlett shows off her new millenary creation she fashioned at the hat making session last week in preparation for the Miners and Mushers Ball this Saturday.



Photo by Diana Haecker/2006Nugget archive

LINDBLOM CREEK— A photo taken in November 2006 shows Glacier Creek Road and abandoned culverts in frozen Lindblom creek. Water flows over the road, with no culvert in place.

•Rock Creek

continued from page 1

that re-colonized the old tailings and disturbing the stream channels again is not without controversy. The Board of Fisheries is concerned about this, and Jim Marcotte, executive director of the BoF, said that a letter to the Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Transportation is in the works that cautions the departments to use streambed gravel for road improvements.

Deputy Chief of the Corps’ regulatory division Kevin Morgan also explained to *The Nome Nugget* that in the Corps’ reasoning, “mitigation is defined as avoidance, minimization and compensation.”

Since wetlands are going to be replaced with concrete, mill and mining facilities, and a large acreage will be turned into a dump for pulverized and chemically treated rock, the Corps said compensation is required. “Alaska Gold Company is required in consultation with USFWS and the Corps to develop and implement a mitigation plan to offset the unavoidable loss of wetlands and high-value bird habitats,” Morgan said.

Morgan also repeated AGC’s proposal to fill the mine pits with water “to create fish over-wintering habitat.”

In terms of accountability and enforcement oversight, Morgan quotes a special condition dealing with a culvert at Lindblom Creek. Morgan wrote in an email interview that the condition “requires replacement of the Lindblom Creek culvert on Glacier Creek Road with one of sufficient size and design to accommodate increased flows was re-written to include what we would consider non-compliance with the condition.”

There is no culvert in place at the described location. Lindblom Creek still runs across Glacier Creek Road while old discarded culverts are sitting in the middle of the stream on the downhill side of the road.

The Corps suspended the original wetlands permit issued on August 21, 2006, after the Nome citizens group “Bering Strait Citizens for Responsible Resource Development” and three individual Nomeites— Austin Ahmasuk, Sue Steinacher and Jana Varrati— filed

a civil lawsuit in November 2006 at the US District Court in Anchorage.

The lawsuit, filed by the public interest law firm Trustees for Alaska and the Western Mining Action Project, alleged that the Corps illegally issued a Clean Water Act Section 404 wetlands permit by violating

“We are committed to protecting important aquatic resources, while allowing reasonable development within the state of Alaska,”...

the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act.

The plaintiffs claimed that the Corps should have prepared an Environmental Impact Statement to independently determine the effects of the open pit mines proposed for Rock Creek and Big Hurrah on human health and the environment. They also claim that the Corps did not consult with local tribes to satisfy National Historic Preservation Act requirements.

The permit was issued on August 21 and authorized AGC to place 13.7 million cubic yards of fill on 414.5 acres of wetlands.

After the Corps voluntarily suspended the permit, the lawsuit was tossed out by order of US District Court Judge Ralph Beistline.

The newly instated permit will take effect March 13, when the Corps’ Alaska District commander Col. Kevin Wilson is expected to sign the final paperwork.

“We are committed to protecting important aquatic resources, while allowing reasonable development within the state of Alaska,” Wilson said. “I’m confident that this decision is a positive reflection of our efforts to provide an equitable balance that is in the public’s best interest.”

The Corps, however, did not address the issues brought up by the lawsuit, mainly the lack of the thorough environmental review that the plaintiffs were suing about. Trustees for Alaska lawyer Vicki Clark told *The Nome Nugget* that she is reviewing the new permit language. “We haven’t come to a decision whether to refile the lawsuit,” Clark said last week.

Plaintiff Sue Steinacher expressed disappointment, saying, “While we hoped for more from the Corps, I can’t say that this action comes as any surprise.” She said that the decision to file the suit wasn’t based on whether it could be won or not. “It was based on what

we believed was the right thing to do. I continue to believe that the people of Nome deserve an

continued on page 5



Photo by Diana Haecker/2006 Nugget archive

CULVERT— Two abandoned culverts sit in the middle of Lindblom Creek while water flows freely over Glacier Creek Road with no culvert in place.

“The Must-Do Fun Iditarod Event”



Miners & Musher's Ball

Saturday, March 10

7 p.m. - Midnight

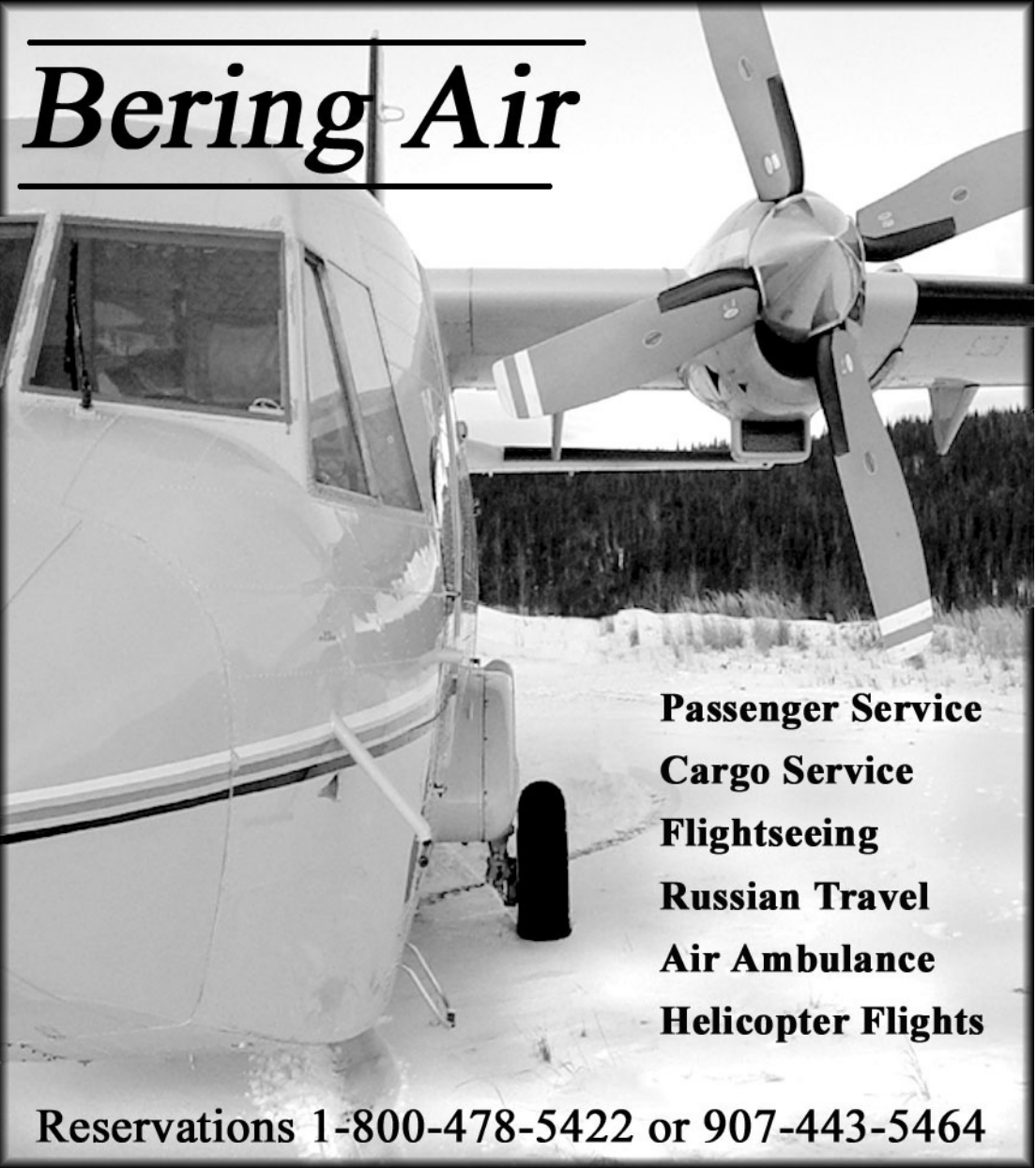
Mini-Convention Center

Tickets \$35 at the door

Costumes © Awards © Entertainment
Light Refreshments © No-Host Bar

All proceeds for benefit of the Arctic Business & Professional Women's Scholarship Fund

Bering Air



Passenger Service

Cargo Service


Flightseeing

Russian Travel

Air Ambulance

Helicopter Flights

Reservations 1-800-478-5422 or 907-443-5464




Mini-Mukluk Marathon

Sunday, March 11, 2 p.m.

Race from Nome Rec Center to Swanberg Dredge and return

\$10 Registration Fee (includes limited edition t-shirt)
Sign up at 1:30 p.m. on race day

Call Erin Lillie at 304-1760 for more information.
Sponsored by Nome Rotary Club



Corps explains permit reinstatement

After the Army Corps of Engineers issued a press release announcing the reinstatement of the Section 404 Clean Water Act wetlands permit for Alaska Gold Company’s Rock Creek mine, Kevin Morgan, deputy chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Regulatory Division, responded to questions asked via email by *The Nome Nugget* reporter Diana Haecker.

Nome Nugget: The press release said, “based on its own independent analysis, which considered information provided by the permit applicant and [...] the large mine team...”, how has the analysis been independent if its based on the applicant’s input and the state’s input?

Kevin Morgan: The Corps Regulatory Program permit application evaluation process is information driven. The applicant, as the project proponent, is required to provide us information about the project. We also solicit comments and information from the public, other agencies, and individuals via a Public Notice. The State also has information needs due to its permit application requirements. It is the Corps’ responsibility under the National Environmental Policy Act, Corps Regulatory Program regulations, and the Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines, to independently analyze all this information and decide whether it is accurate.

NN: What is the reduction in acreage to place fill material based on?

KM: As a result of the Corps suspending the permit and our directive that no new fill be placed in wetland areas or other areas subject to our jurisdiction, Alaska Gold Company had its consultants review the wetland mapping submitted on the permit application drawings. It was discovered there were drafting errors on the permit application drawings; there were areas mapped as wetlands in the footprint of the North Development Rock Dump, Tailings Storage Facility, and the access and haul roads that were in fact uplands.

NN: Which special conditions were clarified, and how, to improve enforceability?

KM: Several special conditions were clarified. Some conditions were either re-written or language was added to specify what we would consider to be non-compliance with the condition, and/or to require Alaska Gold Company to undertake certain actions. For instance, Special Condition 3, which requires replacement of the Lindblom Creek culvert on Glacier Creek Road with one of sufficient size and design to accommodate increased flows, was re-written to include what we would consider non-compliance with the condition.

NN: Which agency or authority will be enforcing the conditions?

KM: The Corps of Engineers has the discretionary authority to enforce its permits, including the special conditions.

NN: What are the other mitigation measures to reduce the project’s impacts?

KM: The Corps’ Regulatory Program defines mitigation as avoidance, minimization, and compensation for impacts. Compensation can include restoration of disturbed areas, creation of new aquatic areas, enhancement of existing aquatic areas, purchasing or placing conservation easements on valuable habitat areas, or the payment of an in-lieu fee to a land trust.

Some of the measures include: Higher value willow habitat, which provides habitat for birds and moose in the area, was avoided in the applicant’s proposed project plan where practicable. In addition, Alaska Gold Company is required in consultation with USFWS and the Corps to develop and implement a mitigation plan to offset the unavoidable loss of wetlands and high-value bird habitats. The mine pits will be filled with water to create fish over-wintering habitat. This will create 41 acres of waters of the U.S. Wetlands will be reclaimed at the temporary organic overburden stockpiles and the water management systems; this will result in the reclamation of 106 acres of waters of the U.S.

NN: How will disturbing vegetation that colonized the historic mine tailings in the streams contribute to healthier streams?

KM: Replanting or redistributing of willows salvaged from other disturbed areas to increase bank or slope stability and removing and re-contouring historical placer tail-

ings provides banks for stream establishment while allowing for additional flood capacity. Establishment of riparian vegetation, including willows, would also provide shade for fish. The re-contouring of the stream would increase sinuosity of the stream channel as well as create pools for fish.


NN: The Corps suspended the permit in response to the civil lawsuit filed in US District Court. Were any of the allegations in the lawsuit addressed in the modified permit language?

KM: A Corps permit describes the work that is authorized and the special conditions. Detailed analysis and rationale which leads to the permit decision is in the Permit Evaluation Decision Document.

•Rock Creek

continued from page 4
Environmental Impact Statement. I continue to believe that our suit was an effort to stand up for democracy. I anticipate that these convictions will continue to guide our next step,” Steinacher said. NovaGold issued a press release, saying that they believed the lawsuit to be without merit and that the process undertaken by the Corps, along with the voluntary public consultation and information process undertaken by NovaGold, complied with applicable laws and gave ample opportunity for all stakeholders to be heard prior to final permits being issued on August 21, 2006. “We are pleased with the Corps’ decision to reinstate the permit, and have appreciated the support expressed for the project by the community of Nome, and

in particular the Bering Straits and Sitnasuak Native Corporations,” said Peter Harris, senior vice president and chief operating officer at NovaGold. “The result of the permit review supports our belief that both NovaGold and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers followed all necessary procedures when permitting Rock Creek. “Construction ahe plant site has continued as allowed, and to this point there have been no significant impacts to the schedule. With the permit reinstated, we can now resume work at other areas on site and anticipate that production will begin at Rock Creek in Q3-2007.”



The City of Nome requests the honor
of your presence at the
~ Gold Rush Gala ~

An event welcoming
Governor Sarah Palin & Lt. Governor Sean Parnell
to Nome and the Seward Peninsula
The evening features hors d’oeuvres,
no-host bar, live music and entertainment
Tickets will be available at the Arctic Trading Post and City Hall
Admittance: \$35.00 Single; \$50.00 Couple
Attire: Black Tie Optional
Saturday, March 31, 2007 • 7:00 p.m. — 11 p.m.
Nome Recreation Center
208 East Sixth Avenue • Nome, Alaska

The Arctic Warrior Band will also perform for the community
Friday, March 30, 7 p.m. at the Nome Elementary School Gym.
Come and Enjoy!

MHT 4 x 3
black and white
Mental Health to
ANC
Print

AK Airlilnes
5 x 4
black and white