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Sunday, February 24, 2008

Story last updated at 2/24/2008 - 4:15 am

Hoverbarge plan worries Taku River users

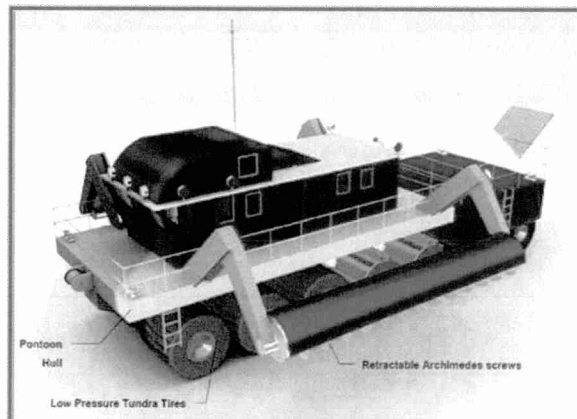
By Kate Golden | JUNEAU EMPIRE

Cabin owner Errol Champion is more pessimistic and worried than ever after spending the last week driving snowmachines on the Taku River.

He is one of the many river users waiting for more information about the hoverbarge and newly invented Amphitrac, which the Tulsequah Chief Mine operators have proposed for hauling supplies and ore on the Taku River.

"Part of the river still has ice, but is covered with overflow and surely will not hold the pressures of the ACB (hoverbarge)," Champion said. "And the Amphitrac will be clawing its way along, making a complete mess of the river channel. ... The results are unknown, but it cannot be good."

Redfern Resources Ltd. is expected to take at least two or three weeks to provide more information on how these vehicles may affect the salmon-rich river. About 400 fishermen and seafood industry workers rely on the Taku for their livelihood.



Proposed vessel: The new Amphitrac was specifically designed for use on the Taku River.

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Environmentalists and state permitters are worried the experimental vessels will hurt fish and other wildlife. Rivers Without Borders, a national conservation group headquartered in Juneau, paid for a study that says the company's claims of minimal damage are unfounded.

Meanwhile, Redfern, based in Vancouver, British Columbia, has produced pictures for the public showing a feather-light footprint for the hoverbarge - with one pound per square inch pressure, less than an eighth of the pressure of a human footprint.

"They have all their environmental documents saying it's not going to cause this problem, that problem or the other problem," said biologist Jackie Timothy of the Office of Habitat Management and Permitting in the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. "We need to see if they can make good on that."

On this side of the border, Redfern's plan is unusual and requires much less paperwork than most projects because it involves no federal lands. The barge system would transport people, ore and goods between Juneau and the multi-metal mine, which is on the Tulsequah River and about 40 miles northeast of Juneau.

State permitters said they're trying to compensate for the work the federal government would ordinarily do.

"It's kind of like we're doing the EIS (environmental impact statement) because there is no federal permit involved," said Joe Donohue, the lead reviewer for the Alaska Coastal Management Program.

Shallow waters, ice operations

"When there's plenty of water in the river, we're basically talking about conventional navigation," said Tom Crafford, large mine permit coordinator for the Department of Natural Resources. The barge would be pulled by a tug in the summer.

"Low-water operations - that, I think, is the real issue," he said, particularly when there's ice.

Moose and other animals travel across the frozen river in the winter, and juvenile salmon grow up under the protection of the ice. The timing of spring break-up and flood levels all affect wildlife's chances of survival.

Champion, on the river last week, wrote in an e-mail that while the ice has been melting, the animals can still run across it.

But he has trouble imagining how a 750-ton loaded hoverbarge and the Amphitrac that pulls and pushes it would avoid creating open leads and ice dams. Moose would get stuck. People wouldn't be able to cross.

The problem is expressed by Michel Lapointe, professor of geography at McGill University and director of the Centre Interuniversitaire de Recherche sur le Saumon Atlantique in Montreal, Canada, in the Rivers Without Borders report:

"Any such changes to breakup flooding regime can have far-reaching, ecosystem-level effects on fish and wildlife habitat," Lapointe wrote.

Originally Redfern and the state proposed testing the vessel system in Southeast in the winter. But the company announced recently that construction delays make it likely the Amphitrac will not arrive on the river until after the ice melts. That means the system could be permitted before it is tested on ice.

Redfern's operations plan says the vessels would avoid open leads in the ice cover. The company also plans to document which areas have the sketchiest ice cover and which are more stable, record how long it takes to form ice, and adjust all operations as necessary.

"That will be something we'll be working with DNR to address," said Redfern spokeswoman Salina Landstad.

Critics, however, say it's an example of testing that shouldn't be done on the Taku.

Donohue of the coastal management program said this week that a likely condition of a needed land-use permit would be that if the vessels kept ice from forming, they would not be allowed on the river at that point.

Testing the company's claims

State permitters haven't seen a picture of the Amphitrac yet, because it doesn't exist. The Amphitrac was invented for the Taku River. It has soft tires used elsewhere for tundra travel; Archimedes screws, a propulsion device that pushes water through pipes on either side of the vessel; and steel screws for moving across ice.

In the summer, a tug would move the hoverbarge. In the winter and shoulder seasons, the Amphitrac would do the job, pushing or pulling the 88-foot-wide, unmanned barge. A powerboat may go ahead of them and scout out the route.

The company has told the state it may use two Amphitracs and two hoverbarges. But state permitters said they weren't sure how this would work and were waiting for more information.

"If the vessels make it to Juneau, that means they meet or exceed the manufacturers' claims about performance and minimal environmental impacts," Timothy of the habitat office wrote in an e-mail.

Redfern says it has devised plans to prevent environmental damage. According to its November 2007 operating plan, the vessels would, among other protective measures:

- Avoid - as opposed to "minimize" - creating new channels.
- Avoid disturbing the sand flats on the shallowest 17-mile stretch, on the U.S. side, upstream from Annex Creek to the Taku Lodge.
- Avoid eulachon, or hooligan, and salmon spawning areas.
- Minimize the potential for stranding juvenile fish with waves from the vessels.
- Minimize resuspension of sediment and bank erosion from the vessels' wake.
- Minimize noise effects on fish and marine mammals such as seals, which congregate in the spring at the edge of the ice.

The American Bureau of Shipping will test the vessels on the Columbia River on standards that Donohue of the Coastal Management Program described as "relatively stringent."

Then they'll be brought to Southeast Alaska and tried at Sheep Creek and Eagle River Beach, just south of Juneau.

These areas are not similar to the Taku in many respects, said Donohue, who grew up fishing on that river.

But they are visible from the road system, which means that residents as well as permitters would be able to see the vessels at work. Donohue will be watching, for example, the turning radius, how long the vessels take to stop and how they move over gravel.

"We're like everyone else," he said. "We're waiting to see how this thing's going to work."

Sheep Creek is a salmon stream, so testing would be done only when the fish are absent, Donohue said.

From there, if permits are granted, the Taku is the testing area. The permit would last for a year and include an environmental monitoring program that Redfern is working on now.

Creative monitoring

There are challenges to that environmental monitoring for which Redfern will have to get creative, according to Timothy.

An example: Young salmon tend to stay under large woody debris and in slower, safer water. Redfern says it won't move those woody snags in the river; they're more of a problem on the Canadian side of the river. But fry also may hang out in the main channel on the sand flats, where Redfern proposes to go. The waters of the Taku are often opaque from silt.

How would they be able to tell when they're damaging salmon fry that can't be seen?

"That's a very good question and one we have asked the company to explain," Timothy wrote.

She mentioned one possibility of having an environmental monitor walk along the beach to check for fry being thrown or washed ashore.

Redfern spokeswoman Salina Landstad said the answer would involve watching spray that's made by the vehicles.

"If the water is spraying, then it's essentially clear," she said, meaning it would be easy to see fry.

'Revokable at will'

The state would reserve the right to pull Redfern's permit at any time.

"This gives the state of Alaska a hook into the whole system," said Donohue of the coastal management program.

"If they were constantly breaking through the ice, we can yank that permit," Crafford said.

Landstad emphasized the permit process is a chance for Redfern to hear and respond to all of the state's concerns and she's confident the company will do so.

Such statements do not reassure Taku River users, who say the damage would have already been done at that point.

• Contact reporter Kate Golden at 523-2276 or kate.golden@juneauempire.com.

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Wednesday, December 10, 2008

Story last updated at 12/10/2008 - 9:32 am

Redfern barge plan for Taku River under review

Fishermen and others still concerned about the effects of vehicles

By Kate Golden | JUNEAU EMPIRE

State permitters this month are reviewing Redfern Resources Ltd.'s revised plan to haul mine supplies and ore on the Taku River year round.

This is the Vancouver company's second application. The state terminated the first one this summer after the company changed the tow vehicles it planned to use to haul an air-cushion barge across Taku ice.

The first plan generated widespread concern among sport and commercial fishermen and other users of the salmon-rich river. More than 250 people attended the last public meeting in February.

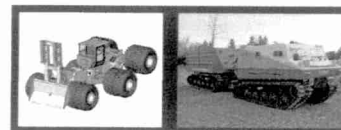
Tim Davies of Redfern said the new plan was designed to address those concerns.



Courtesy P

Change of plans: Redfern Resources Ltd. has replaced a designer amphibious tow vehicle with two that already exist, including the one pictured above, which the company calls an "amphibious tractor." The "tracked articulated vehicle" operates in "nearly all terrain," the company said.

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Know and Go

What: Public information session on a plan to barge mine supplies and ore on the Taku River.

When: 6:30-9:30 p.m. Thursday.

"Everything, from the equipment to the monitoring plan, was designed to avoid (impact) or accommodate concerns," he said.

Where: Ballroom 3, Centennial Hall in downtown Juneau.

Public comments must be submitted from scratch. The public can learn about the project Thursday at Centennial

The permits

Redfern needs two permits from the state, for travel over land and through fish habitat. The project also goes through an Alaska coastal zone consistency review.

The last permit process was plagued by delays. This time, Redfern worked in a "prereview" process with state permitters to submit a more complete application.

That's not a prejudging of its merits, said permitters.

"Agency representatives are very careful to make sure that there's no kind of prereview approvals going on," said Crafford, the large mine permitting coordinator at the Department of Natural Resources.

Redfern is owned by Vancouver-based Redcorp Ventures Ltd.

Barging on the Taku

A marine barge will haul materials between the mine's Juneau office at Alaska Marine Lines and the mouth of the Taku.

There, the barge's load will be transferred to an air cushion barge, also called a hoverbarge.

The barge can't power itself. It will be shuttled by four "amphibious tractors" - either tracked or with big, soft, float-like Rolligon-like tires, two in front and two behind - to the barge landing site on the Tulsequah River.

Sixteen miles of the 28-mile route are in Alaska.

From late May to October, the hoverbarge will be moved with a shallow draft tug boat.

The trickiest part is at Canyon Island. On the west is a deeper but narrow channel. On the east is a shallow, braided area with a shifting gravel bar.

In the new summer plan, the tug will hand off the barge at Canyon Island to the amphibious vehicles, which will haul around the east side. Meanwhile the tug takes the deeper channel and reconnects with the barge at the other end.

In the winter, the hoverbarge will be pushed and pulled over the frozen river floodplain by the four amphibious tractors. Snowmachines or another tracked vehicle may groom the snow and provide crew change and emergency support.

The Taku's habitat for salmon, hooligan and other species is arguably most vulnerable in the shoulder seasons of fall and spring, when the ice that protects the river is forming or thawing.

Redfern's Davies said the new plan is more definite about when the company will cease operations altogether for the shoulder seasons.

Winter operations will stop, for example, when open leads are too many or too wide for the amphibious vehicles - which have very limited propulsion in water - and won't restart until the river has a minimum flow.

"Most people would agree that's a good thing," Crafford said. "Those are the really difficult times of the year to operate, and the times of the year which you would most likely be disturbing the land the greatest. The new proposal in that sense is, I think, good news."

"It does create a different set of issues," he said, including the "additional complexity" of handing off the air cushion barge around Canyon Island.

Noise and wake

Two of the biggest concerns from Taku users this year were the noise and the wake the barge will produce.

Redfern's plan says the vehicles' engines will be muffled and enclosed, and says they won't be louder than 70 decibels at 100 feet. (Seventy decibels is perhaps twice as loud as ordinary conversation.)

They'll also have minimal wake, according to the company.

State permitters will require the system to be tested in Juneau to verify that's all true before allowing the vehicles the Taku.

Environmental monitoring

The plan calls for environmental monitoring that will be refined in the first few years "to the extent practical."

Redfern is required by Canadian permitters as well as Alaskans to monitor bank erosion, the turbidity of fish habitat and whether juvenile salmon are being stranded. The permitters have been coordinating their efforts, Crafford said.

The company will also conduct "annual follow-up with property owners, commercial tourism operators, commercial fishers and other users of the river ... to ensure concerns regarding barging operations can be addressed in a timely manner," according to the plan.

Questioning the plan

Concerns remain among Taku users.

Rivers Without Borders field coordinator Chris Zimmer said the company has shown the last two summers, with conventional barging, that it's not prepared to deal with the difficult Taku. Groundings are not uncommon for much smaller vehicles on this braided, shallow, dynamic river, he said.

The winter, he said, is likely to be even tougher. And these vehicles have never been used in concert.

"Redfern simply hasn't proven they can operate this barge safely in the Taku, given the novelty of the proposal on the dynamic Taku," Zimmer said. "It's quite a fleet of different vehicles out there, and it kind of strikes me as a Keystone Cops routine."

Zimmer hired scientists to examine Redfern's previous plan for shortcomings, and is doing so for this one as well.

Could Redfern come up with a Taku plan that would satisfy Zimmer?

"There may be, but we sure as hell haven't seen it yet," he said.

Karl Vandor of the Taku River Cabin Owners Association said his group's main discussions over the last year have been the "headache" of the Tulsequah Chief plans. He doesn't think the barge will be controllable in the infamous Taku winds.

"We think it's a harebrained scheme. It's just basically going to chew up the river."

"I don't want anybody to think that we're anti-mine," he added.

Redfern's Tim Davies vowed to address Taku users' concerns.

"When a project has the potential to impact people's lifestyles, they have every right to raise concerns," Davies said. "If people bring concerns or information to us, we will look at it seriously."

The public process

Zimmer and others are concerned that the permit process is shorter this time around: 30 days instead of 50.

"We've got the agencies doing a bare-minimum review here, and I think the Taku - the most important salmon river in Southeast Alaska - deserves more," Zimmer said.

State permitter Crafford said the original 50-day review was "a mistake."

He also noted that state permitters can stop the clock to ask for more information, and were already preparing to do so.

Thursday's public meeting is scheduled a week after the state announced its formal review had begun. That has garnered grumbles among fishermen and others who haven't had time to read the operations plan yet.

But Crafford said it was necessary, because permitters want to hear the public's concerns before they ask the company for more information - and that deadline, in the shorter schedule, is next Tuesday.

"It would look a bit like a sham if it's after the fact, and you can't ask any questions or require anything more that might come out of that meeting," Crafford said.

- Contact reporter Kate Golden at kate.golden@juneauempire.com.