



STATE OF NEW MEXICO
DEPARTMENT OF GAME & FISH

One Wildlife Way, Santa Fe, NM 87507

Tel: (505) 476-8000 | Fax: (505) 476-8180

For information call: (888) 248-6866

www.wildlife.state.nm.us

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Sunland Park

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Jal

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Los Ranchos

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Santa Fe

21 December 2023

Alaina Osimowicz, Permit Lead
Mining Act Reclamation Program
Mining and Minerals Division (MMD)
1220 South St. Francis Drive
Santa Fe, NM 87505

RE: 5-Year Closeout Plan Revision, GCC Rio Grande Tijeras Mine and Mill, Bernalillo County, New Mexico, Permit No. BE001RE; NMDGF Project No. 3112.

Dear Ms. Osimowicz,

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (Department) has reviewed the 5-Year Closeout Plan Revision (Plan) referenced above. Staff from the Department, MMD, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), New Mexico Environment Department, and the Operator conducted a site inspection on 20 December 2023. The Department provides the following comments and recommendations regarding the Plan.

GCC Rio Grande, Inc. (GCC) proposes to incorporate adequately stable, vertical mine highwalls into the post-mining reclamation “to provide ample raptor habitat”. The Department supports the incorporation of highwalls into the post-mining reclamation plan. However, in order for the highwalls to provide functional habitat for nesting raptors, ravens, and other avian species, the Department recommends including the creation of ledges and cavities in the highwall design. The Department also recommends further enhancing the habitat value of the highwalls by creating an undulating or irregular profile and by placing talus material along the toe of each highwall to provide habitat for small mammals and reptiles. In the more gently sloping and flat areas of reclaimed habitat, the Department further suggests incorporating brush and rock/boulder piles to enhance habitat diversity and provide shelter and protection from predators for local, smaller-bodied, terrestrial wildlife species.

The Department concurs with the reclamation seed mix proposed in Table 5-2 of the Plan. The Department also recommends that only certified weed-free seed be used to avoid inadvertently introducing non-native species to the reclamation site. Any alternate plant species, used to substitute for primary plant species that are unavailable at the time of reclamation, should also be native. When possible, the Department recommends using seeds that are sourced from the same region and habitat type as the reclamation site and suggests including seeds from a region that represents potential future climatic conditions at the site.

In Section 3.1, GCC is proposing post-mining land uses that include: industrial/commercial, wildlife habitat, and recreation. The primary post-mining land use will be wildlife habitat, with recreation identified as an associated, compatible use. The stated goal of the Plan is to provide

for the re-establishment of a self-sustaining ecosystem on the permit area following closure that is consistent with the surrounding area and post-mining land use. Section 3.2 states: "Once its operations cease and reclamation is successfully completed, GCC is not currently planning on retaining ownership of the permitted area. Future land ownership may include either a private party or a governmental agency. If current trends continue, the property could become desirable for residential use. However, if this occurs at some future date, it would occur after GCC sells the land and the next owner would be responsible for any development and costs associated with the land use revision".

The Department has ongoing concerns that a future change in land ownership of the mine and mill site from GCC to another private entity may result in a change in land use that would adversely impact a section of the Tijeras Canyon Safe Passage Project for wildlife. Of specific concern is an I-40 underpass with an associated animal detection system that is located near Public School Road. Wildlife fencing is used to direct wildlife into the underpass and safely across I-40 at the site of the animal detection system, thereby providing important habitat connectivity between the Manzano and Sandia Mountains. Future residential development on the western portion of the mine permit area could significantly impair or prevent wildlife from utilizing the underpass. The Department recommends that any future land sale or transfer pursued by GCC provides for the establishment and protection of an adequate wildlife corridor that maintains connectivity to the I-40 safe passage underpass. Because the western portion of the mine permit area is bordered by the Cibola National Forest, the Department believes that incorporating a wildlife corridor as an extension of the adjacent National Forest land would be the most effective way to preserve habitat connectivity to this underpass. The Department strongly recommends that GCC continue discussions with the USFS regarding a possible land exchange to ensure that critical wildlife habitat connectivity between the Manzano and Sandia Mountains is preserved and protected.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the proposed Plan. If you have any questions, please contact Ron Kellermueller, Mining and Energy Habitat Specialist, at (505) 270-6612 or ronald.kellermueller@dgf.nm.gov.

Sincerely,

Matt Wunder, Ph.D.
Chief, Ecological and Environmental Planning Division

cc: USFWS NMES Field Office