

## **Coteau Mine and Federal Officials Show Disrespect**

by Charmaine White Face

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Just south of Lake Sakakawea in western North Dakota lies an area that was, and still is sacred to many different Native American nations. No, it's not advertised or designated on any maps. Doing so would invite exploitation for money, and misuse by those that don't understand. But now the area is being threatened by coal strip mining so information about the stone circles, burial sites, rock cairns, and stone effigies is starting to trickle out in an effort to preserve and protect them. The effort from a Native American perspective is not just to preserve and protect. There are consequences for disturbing such places. These are the consequences caused by the lack of respect.

A total of 1,349 sites will be destroyed. According to Byron Olson, the Tribal Archaeologist for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, "the proposed project will destroy more cultural resources than any other current project in the United States."

This also includes the destruction of more National Register of Historic Place eligible sites than any other project. Olson stated, "the mine expansion will completely destroy twenty-seven NRHP sites."

The mine is an expansion of an already existing coal strip mining operation called the Freedom Mine in Mercer County, ND, operated by The Coteau Properties Company. The North Dakota Resource Management Plan describes the area as suitable for mining but includes steep slopes and key wildlife habitat. The wildlife habitat information should have the environmental and hunting groups raising a ruckus, but little is being heard from that quarter.

The larger impact to the environment with the increased surface mining will hopefully be addressed in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement which might be released in April. Impacts caused by the surface mining need to be addressed as acid rain is one of impacts and will be falling on all the farms and ranches in North and South Dakota.

The long-term implication of burning coal and the resultant destruction to the atmosphere must also be included. How much will this increase global warming?

The expansion is proposed for more than 17,000 acres. The federal agency responsible for issuing the DEIS is the Office of Surface Mining, although the Bureau of Land Management in Dickinson, ND, is accepting the comments from the public.

The environmental concerns also are on the minds of those Tribal members who are aware of this project. But the total destruction of the sacred sites and burial sites is more appalling. Where is the respect?

In order to assuage these concerns, the Coteau company is trying to get three tribes to sign a

programmatic agreement. The Tribes that have been asked are The Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara), the Fort Peck Tribes, and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. Other tribes such as the Oglala Sioux Tribe, the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, and the Yankton Sioux Tribe are being asked to concur.

The agreement creates "the establishment of an Indian Cultural Education Trust as established by [ND] State legislation and implemented under the terms of a donor agreement among The Three Affiliated Tribes, the Fort Peck Tribes and Coteau..." but leaves out the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the other Sioux Tribes, a classic divide and conquer tactic in writing. As this area is within the recognized treaty territory of the larger Sioux Nation, the Oceti Sakowin, word is starting to get out as the Nakota and Dakota tribes from Canada also have vested interests in these sacred places. Their ancestors are also buried here. The Dakota tribes in Minnesota and South Dakota will need to be included, not forgetting the feisty Lakotas of South Dakota.

The agreement calls for setting aside less than one percent (1%) of the area for the stockpiling of the stones that are removed from the sacred sites; stone circles, effigies, and burial mounds. Coteau offers to put plaques at this set-aside corner that explains what was removed and destroyed.

I wonder, if there were only 100 graves in Arlington National Cemetery, and if 99 were destroyed and their headstones stockpiled in a corner, and only 1 grave was left to remember those other 99 people, would the American public be outraged? This is exactly what is going to happen in the Coteau West Mine Area, only worse. Not only will burial sites be destroyed, but sacred places and archeological sites that are irreplaceable will disappear. I wonder if there is a connection within the American psyche regarding the irreplaceability of a sacred place? Or has the god of money and physical possessions so taken over the American value system that the only thing sacred is the almighty dollar? For the Coteau company the answer is obvious.

Unfortunately, Doug Burger from the Bureau of Land Management appears to think the same way as the Coteau company as he has stated, "It is our expectation that a programmatic agreement and management plan will be signed prior to our issuing a draft EIS..." As a federal official, he is bound to take an unbiased position until all the federal processes are completed. Now the tribes know where he stands and that this process will not be unbiased. Now the rest of the American public knows the classic maltreatment of Native American people by large companies and federal officials when sacred sites and burial mounds are in the way of making money.

Will there ever be respect for intangibles such as sacredness? Our ancestors were here for thousands of years. They left these sites as guides for our behavior and places for us to pray. There were reasons why more than 1300 sacred places are found in this one area. Will our ancestors' messages left in rock circles and effigies be respected and left in place for the generations yet to come? When will our concerns about their burial places count? When will our understanding of sacredness be respected?

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