FRIENDS OF THE PEAK DISTRICT

FLUORSPAR EXTRACTION POLICY STATEMENT

BACKGROUND

National context

Fluorspar (or fluorite, CaF_2) is a relatively rare 'industrial' mineral whose main economic reserves in the UK are now found solely within the Southern Pennine orefield – an area largely synonymous with the Peak District National Park. Fluorspar is often a major component in vein deposits (the associated minerals being lead, barytes and calcite) which form vertically or horizontally within limestone rocks. Extraction is usually by open cast methods, often to considerable depths (sometimes releasing limestone for aggregate) and some underground mining also occurs.

Local issues

Open cast sites, often worked and re-worked over extended periods, can have considerable environmental impacts including visual intrusion, heavy lorry movements, amenity issues (dust where limestone is crushed for aggregate, impacts on rights of way etc) and archaeological impacts (since many sites are in former lead mining areas). However many sites, especially where limestone is not exported, can be restored relatively quickly to near-original levels and sensitive restoration can often enhance biodiversity, geodiversity and landscape in the longer term.

The sole UK processor, Glebe Mines ceased operating in December 2011, but still own and maintain a series of extensive sites (both open cast pits and underground mines) in the Peak District. Their processing site at Cavendish Mill, near Stoney Middleton was fed with c.450,000 tonnes of raw (vein) material a year which yielded 50-60,000 t of 'acid grade' (97% CaF_2) fluorspar which was sold onwards into the UK chemicals industry as feedstock for hydrogen fluoride and many fluorine based chemicals. Cavendish Mill has a significant environmental and visual footprint over a large area, including current and former waste lagoons (dams), stockyards and an ageing stock of buildings and plant. Irrespective of future working plans, there is a significant legacy of environmental and landscape impacts that will still need to be addressed.

National need issues

Until the late 1990s, it was considered that fluorspar extraction was in the 'national interest', latterly to underpin the chemicals industry. In the last decade however, global markets and a revised policy stance by government (DTI now DBERR) has led to the abandonment of the term 'national need' and there is currently no clear guidance – either in planning or economic terms – that determines whether the importance of fluorspar extraction should outweigh the statutory national interest of protecting national parks from major minerals development.

Research by the British Geological Survey (BGS, 2008) suggests that if an indigenous fluoro-chemicals industry is to be maintained in the UK, this is heavily reliant on domestic fluorspar production. Currently in terms of the UK economy, fluorspar adds 507 jobs and £35 million (total direct, indirect and downstream employment and gross value added, GVA). One hundred jobs and £4.6 million are generated locally. However the recent closure of Glebe Mines and the replacement of UK supply by Mexican ore undercuts this analysis.

National planning guidance (*Mineral Planning Statement 1: Planning and Minerals* (para.14)) continues the general presumption against major minerals development in national parks save in exceptional circumstances which may come about through an assessment of:

i. the need for the development, including in terms of national considerations of mineral supply and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, on the local economy;
ii. the cost of, and scope for making an alternative supply from outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way;
iii. any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities and the extent to which that could be moderated.

The key questions arising are whether there is a national case in relation to fluorspar supply, whether it can be supplied from other locations or by other means and how mitigatable the environmental impacts might be. This now engenders a case-by-case approach which is preferable to the previous situation where 'national need' was a potential 'trump card' for any applications.

POLICY AIMS

- Oppose major open-cast fluorspar extraction where there are significant landscape, environmental, amenity or heritage impacts which would conflict with and cause undue damage to the valued characteristics of the PDNP, even where need is shown
- Encourage a switch to sourcing fluorspar predominantly from underground mines, assuming specific deep mining impacts (e.g. subsidence) can be properly addressed
- Working and exporting limestone aggregate from fluorspar sites is not acceptable
- Where environmentally acceptable sites are found, permitted and worked, ensure that day-to-day impacts on communities and amenity are minimised and that significant net restoration benefits are delivered in a timely manner
- Work with the industry to address long term planning issues for fluorspar extraction in the Peak District to ensure that, if and when future supply is needed, it is steered to the most appropriate locations where mitigation and restoration can be planned for appropriately

Any application for development should be subject to all appropriate local, regional and planning policies, particularly in respect of national park status but also any potential impact on statutory or local nature conservation (SPA, SAC, NNR, SSSI and SINC/LNR), heritage designations (SAM, SMR, EH/PDNPA/NE Lead Mining Landscapes), geo-diversity interests (SSSI, RIGS) and local/visitor amenity.

Alternatives

Acid grade fluorspar is available on the world market although quality, price and availability varies markedly. The major global supplier is China although currently export is restricted in favour of domestic fluoro-chemicals production.

In general, we believe it is more sustainable that, where UK need is proven, this should be sourced indigenously. The use of imports raises clear concerns regarding the export of environmental impacts and CO_2 emissions from long distance, ship-borne transport. Similarly it is expected that the PDNP should not supply fluorspar for overseas use, i.e. supporting other countries exporting their environmental damage.

We will continue to monitor, and investigate where necessary, the use of environmentally acceptable alternative materials and processes that could help substitute for fluorspar based products.

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