

## Residents fear environmental havoc as mining firm in Surigao begins full operation

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Fears of environmental havoc have escalated in this town as mining company Greenstone Resources Corporation (Greenstone) is poised for a full-throttle production next month.

Greenstone, a subsidiary of Red 5 Limited Group of Australia, has ruffled not a few feathers in the community for supposedly being insensitive to the complaints of the residents, who say the company's mining practices are adversely affecting the town's water system, threaten farm-based livelihoods, and even caused severe flooding on a scale never before seen in the town's history.

A recent controversy placed Greenstone again in bad light after it attempted to seal off a provincial road for its exclusive use.

The company uses the Barangay Cawilan road for access of its vehicles and equipment as it connects the company's mine and plant site to the national highway. The road is being shared, however, by farmers in two other barangays to transport their produce.

Servando B. Morales, a member of the local government's technical working group that oversees the operations of mining firms in the town, said the incident was typical of the company's cavalier attitude toward the host community.

"A guest never tells the host how to run his own house – that would be impolite; yet that's what's happening here," Morales said.

Greenstone pulled out the guards it posted at the entrance of the road last August after Surigao del Norte Governor Sol F. Matugas intervened, acting on the complaints of parishioners and barangay officials in the area.

That and other past cases demonstrated how impervious Greenstone officials have been to

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various complaints since it began operating in early 2000, Morales said.

Early this year, Greenstone was forced to compensate a number of farmers after its waste dump spilled onto several hectares of rice lands. The company has been dewatering the open pit mine it inherited from the former Surigao Consolidated Mining (Suricon) for years, dumping the wastes on an elevated area near farmlands and houses.

Residents also blamed the mining operations to the worst flooding that hit parts of the town early this year.

“We experienced the worst flooding we never thought would occur here in Barangay Cawilan last February and March this year that damaged crops, livestock and other properties after Greenstone dumped their mine wastes from the open pit they are rehabilitating at the Cawilan creek,” said Bonifacio Dano, an officer of the Parish Pastoral Council in Tubod.

It was Dano’s group that brought the closure of the Cawilan road to Matugas’s attention.

Since Greenstone began its operations, residents said they noticed the erratic water volume at the Cawilan Creek, affecting the town’s water system and even causing severe flooding in Barangays Cawilan, Del Rosario Hubasan and Barangay Dianoc of the adjacent town of Mainit, Surigao del Norte early this year.

Dano said they are pinning their hopes on the governor’s promise to investigate the claims of the residents and parishioners against the mining firm.

“We are optimistic that Governor Matugas will see for herself how this mining firm has damaged our biodiversity,” he said.

But Tubod Parish head catechist Sister Paulina Alota said the impending operation of the company’s processing plant had been one of their bigger concerns.

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They fear that health and environmental problems would arise from the smoke to be emitted by the plant, and worried about how the company plans to dispose of its toxic wastes.

Meanwhile, Matugas said her position on the road closure remains firm and that Greenstone, as a foreign investor, has to respect her decision and abide by the laws and regulations of the province.

“These foreign companies come here to do business and we welcome them. But they should also respect our rules and we must ensure that after they leave, the environment is still intact and the people still have livelihoods,” the governor said during the State of the Municipality Address of Tubod Mayor Cristina Hemady R. Arcillas two weeks ago.

According to company officials, Greenstone will enter production stage next month with the completion of its ore processing plant.

The Siana gold mine is expected to yield some 849,000 ounces of gold throughout its entire 10-year mine life.

Greenstone officials declined an interview for this story when sought for comment. A human resource officer at the company’s plant site in Brgy. Cawilan said journalists must put out a written request for interview first before the management team decides whether to grant or deny it.

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