

LOCAL NEWS

700 acres in Adjuntas made safe from mining

By CHRIS HAWLEY

Of The STAR Staff

ADJUNTAS — Seven hundred acres of Adjuntas mountainside once earmarked for open-pit mining will stay where they are following a gubernatorial order turning the land into a state forest.

Gov. Rosselló on Tuesday handed the land over to the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources to the cheers of environmentalists and Adjuntas residents who have fought mining plans there since the early 1960s.

The order transfers the land from the Lands Administration, which has held the property since 1986. A second order to be signed Monday will officially designate the area as a state forest.

"We are taking steps to protect this environment of which we are all so proud and putting our signature on a measure that will turn into state forestland areas that belong to all Puerto Ricans," Rosselló said during the signing ceremony in Adjuntas.

The order caps 35 years of debate over the land, an area that prompted a law in

1995 outlawing open-pit mining in all of Puerto Rico.

The measure got lukewarm praise Tuesday from Puerto Rican Independence Party Sen. Rubén Berríos, who criticized the Rosselló administration last year for not banning all types of mining.

"It's another step forward, but it's not sufficient," he said. "I can't say I'm against it, because anything like this is encouraging, but I want to actually read the order . . . because the law before left doors open."

In the early 1960s, Ponce Mining Co., a subsidiary of American Metal Climax Corp., bought the property from about 30 landowners in the hope of building a copper, iron and sulfur mine there. Studies of the island's central mountains have shown that rock and soil there contain much copper, but none of it in clearly defined veins that can be excavated with underground mines.

Ponce Mining said that open-pit mining would be the only profitable way of mining the area, and it began negotiations with the commonwealth govern-

ment to excavate the land.

In 1966 the Commonwealth Mining Commission turned down the plan, but over the next two decades the company tried several times to resurrect the idea. Each time, the plan stirred up emotions in Adjuntas, with pro-mining residents arguing that the industry would bring 2,000 jobs to the town and environmentalists claiming that the sulfur runoff would contaminate streams. Government studies questioned whether smelters would release pollution into the air.

"The first problem is that in this process, you throw out about 99 percent of the material you extract — so where are you going to put all that material?" said DNER Secretary Pedro Gelabert. "The second problem is that there's so much sulfur there, what effect would the runoff have on the island?"

In the 1980s, the price of copper fell and Ponce Mining lost interest in Adjuntas. In 1986 the company sold the 700 acres to the government for \$800,000. The property remained in the hands of the Lands Administration for 10 years while

government officials debated what to do with it.

Meanwhile, the commonwealth let one of the anti-mining groups open a cultural center, Casa Pueblo, on part of the land. The Casa Pueblo group will serve as co-administrator of the forest, said the center's director, Alexis Massol Gonzales.

"We've got a say now in what goes on in the forest, which is quite an advance for us," he said. "This is history. This is the first time a community has won so completely, and it's a revolution in that the people of the community are going to be participating."

Also Tuesday, Rosselló signed a law that prohibits any type of construction that could affect the University of Puerto Rico's botanical garden in Río Piedras.

The law should give the university more power to stop both government and private projects, said UPR President Norman Maldonado. In recent years the university has clashed with investors and other government agencies over plans for the Urban Train, Highway 66, the canalization of the Río Piedras and office building construction.