

PORTFOLIO

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Utuada residents join fight against mining company

By DOUGLAS ZEHR
Of The STAR Staff

UTUADO

A Puerto Rican flag perches defiantly atop Cala Abajo mountain. It whips in the wind, 2,500 feet above sea level, and makes a statement: Not on our mountain, not ever. There's gold in these hills. Copper too. It's no mother lode, but the deposit could be worth up to \$1 billion, according to estimates. But Utuada residents, politicians and civic and environmental groups hope to block a Colorado company from mining the metals in this town of 35,000 people.

The company, Southern Gold Resources Inc., has been sampling the soil on the site since 1992. Southern Gold hopes to eventually apply for mining permits. Company officials say the mining operation, which would last 20 years, would be environmentally safe. The 700-cuerda mountain top, which is owned by the Land Authority, would be restored for recreational, agricultural or commercial use after mining is finished.

But that has only stiffened the opposition of the 60-odd families that live near Cala Abajo. The area to be mined

Staking a claim



straddles two rivers — the Viví and the Pellejas. Residents fear both rivers would be stained with sulfur, dust and chemicals. The air and the crops — plantains, bananas and coffee — would also be soiled, they claim.

"The mine could generate jobs, but I don't think it's good business for a town to permit damage to its ecology," said deputy mayor Mariano González.

Southern Gold officials say predictions of ecological damage are premature. The company is currently studying the potential environmental impact of a mine. To get mining permits from the government, Southern Gold will have to submit the test results.

"If we were to pollute anything, we would never receive the permits or mining leases," said Southern Gold President Jim Knox. "There has been a bunch of misinformation [about the project.]"

The mine, if it comes about, won't happen for another three years or so, Knox said.

"Everyone thinks this will happen tomorrow, but that's just not true," Knox said.

The mining site, which borders Adjuntas and Utuada, is

STAR photos by Farah Rivera

The Puerto Rican flag flies in protest high atop Cala Abajo mountain in Utuada, near the site of a proposed gold and copper mine. Farmer Raúl Pérez, right, and his wife, Gladys Santana, both oppose the mine.

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