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Benguet Nickel Mines ore transport ops suspended in Zambales

THE Environmental Management Bureau (EMB) said it suspended the Zambales ore transport operations of a Benguet Corp. unit and those of a second miner after laterite nickel sediment was discovered in agricultural land and coastal areas.

The Region III office of the EMB, which has jurisdiction over Zambales, said the suspension order dated June 9 covers Benguet Nickel Mines Inc. (BNMI), and Eramen Minerals, Inc. (EMI).

Lormelyn E. Claudio, the EMB regional director, told BusinessWorld in a phone interview yesterday that the order focused on transport operations because it was believed the trucks used to haul the ore to port contributed to the environmental damage.

Both orders follow impact evaluation of waterways and the shores of Sta. Cruz, Zambales on April 24-25 and May 20-22 conducted by the EMB-Region III with the Concerned Citizens of Sta. Cruz, Zambales, local and provincial government representatives and the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH).

The suspension orders also found that BNMI's dredged laterite ore materials were "improperly stockpiled" along the Alinsaog River and downstream of adjoining Inmalpay Creek, with EMI "contributing" to siltation.

The investigation showed that the Sta. Cruz coastline, rivers and their tributaries had significant laterite nickel ore sediment, ranging from four to 18 inches in depth, as did farmlands and fishponds near the waterways which had sediment as much as a foot thick.

Ms. Claudio added that conditions for lifting of the hauling suspension included documentary requirements as well as compliance that both firms must show to EMB parent agency Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the respective stakeholders.

These include de-silting affected areas and removing piled laterite ore along waterways to mine facilities or the port area, and paying a penalty for violating Republic Act (RA) 9275, or the Philippine Clean Water Act of 2004 as well as several conditions and an EMB Region III order issued on May 2.

Benguet Corp. operates the Sta. Cruz Nickel Project in Zambales, as well as the Irisan Lime Project in Baguio and the Acupan Gold Project in Itogon, Benguet.

Benguet reported an 84% jump in net income for the first three months of 2014 to P66.6 million after a 56.5% increase in operating revenue to P1.02 billion, driven by improved nickel volumes from BNMI.

Benguet Corp. lost ten centavos or 1.03% to close at P9.60 yesterday. -- **Anton Joshua M. Santos**

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