

Gold Mining Projects in Çanakkale, Turkey, and their Potential Impacts

For over fifteen years, local and foreign companies have been trying to secure mining licences for gold, silver, and other precious metals in the province of Çanakkale, specifically in the Biga Peninsula. Although these attempts have been stopped to a large extent by environmental and non-governmental organizations and residents, mining companies have never lost interest in the region. In spite of court orders that have cancelled the approval of their environmental impact assessments (EIAs), companies re-apply for the same areas with promises of new technologies, improved methods, and eco-friendly operations. The latest example of these attempts is the capacity increase applications for Canadian company Alamos Gold's Kirazlı gold-silver project and its Çamyurt and Mount Ağı gold projects.



Kirazlı Gold-Silver Capacity Increase and Enrichment Project

The Kirazlı gold-silver project is 1.5 kilometres southeast of Kirazlı village in the Central District of Çanakkale Province. It is in the drainage basin of Atikhisar dam, which is the only potable water source of Çanakkale, providing water for over 180,000 people who live in the region. The projected open pit mine and cyanide heap leach processing would endanger these water sources, both through the risk of contamination and through diversion and consumption. Assuming that 3000 litres of water is needed to produce a gram of gold, the amount of water the company is planning to use is equal to 2 years of the Atikhisar dam's water supply. Even assuming that the gold mine is operated as the company claims and will not leave any waste material behind (which is dubious), it will need millions of tons of water for the operation. In fact, it is not even possible to ascertain that the province has enough water to meet current demand, much less the added demand of the mine.

In 2014, Çanakkale Municipal Council decided unanimously that mining activities cannot be undertaken

in the region. Alamos Gold's wholly-owned subsidiary Dogu Biga Mining Inc. sued the Agricultural Engineers Chamber and the Administrative Court of Çanakkale for the right to submit a new proposal to increase the capacity of the Kirazlı project. The Administrative Court dismissed the case, which then went to the Council of State. The Council of State reversed the judgement of the Administrative Court and decided that a new EIA report should be produced. An expert was assigned by the government but paid directly by the company. The new report has not been published for review.

Unfortunately, while all this was going on, the company started to clear cut the forest cover in the project area, cutting trees without the requisite permits and licences. It also started construction on an access road, bypassing the village road which is in the designated mining area. An appeal was filed to the Regional Directorate of Forestry over the illegal deforestation, but before the judicial process was over, the Office of the Governor of Çanakkale Province approved the company's licence.

Potential contamination of potable water supplies is the obvious risk of operating a gold mine in such a sensitive drainage basin. At the same time, the consequences of deforestation and the concomitant destruction of the forest ecosystem already constitute an environmental disaster.

Çamyurt/Mount Aği Gold Project

The Çamyurt/Mount Aği gold project is located between Kızılelma village in the Çan district and Karaköy village in the Bayramiç district of Çanakkale. In 2012, the company applied for an EIA, indicating that the project would cover 27.5 hectares. The legally-required public consultation to get the permission of local councils (following the EIA application) was cancelled on the objections of local residents and non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, the EIA was approved, but after litigation in the courts, the affirmative EIA was cancelled and an injunction was issued to stop operations.

In 2012, after drilling for this project in the area, pollution and turbidity was detected in surface waters and residents found animals dead of toxicity. In 2018, the company applied for another EIA, increasing the project area from 27.5 hectares to 207.15 hectares. The public briefing was announced as a kind of a charitable event in a festive setting. Local people and NGOs again objected, but this time, the public consultation was completed.

According to the company's EIA report, the open pit will be 420 metres wide and 1280 metres long. The report does not commit the company to restoring the pit, though it has made statements to that effect. There is no indication that it is reserving funds for this purpose.

The projected area for Çamyurt/Mount Aği mine is located on the northern slopes of Mount Ida, and it is the source of many seasonal and permanent underground and surface waters. The region is the intersection point of the Kocabaş and Karamenderes river basins. The project area includes both watersheds, so when it is completed, these two major sources will be subject to pollution, and any pollution will travel downstream through the rivers' reservoirs and tributaries into the sea.

Mount Aği is one of the most important features of the region. The Kocabaş River flows into the Marmara Sea at Karabiga, and the Karamenderes River flows into the Aegean Sea at Batakovası. This basin is the source for potable water and agricultural irrigation of Mount Ida, the district of Çan, the district of Bayramiç, and 24 villages.

The region where the Çamyurt/Mount Aği gold project is located is unique, with a unique ecosystem, endemic and rare species, and cultural history. When the cumulative effects of the project are considered, the possible destruction can cause an environmental disaster in the whole region, particularly for Mount Ida.

Possible Damages of the Project

Mount Ida, Mount Ađı, and Mount Kirazlı are home to natural areas and water sources for an area accommodating approximately 2 million people, supporting thousands of species and sustaining the continuity of its fauna and flora, as well as underground and surface water resources in the region.

The Mount Ida region is one of the most important regional shelters for fauna and flora. Among its 82 plant species, 37 of them are endemic, present only on Mount Ida. The region is also a flight corridor for migratory birds.

The forest cover in the region (258,190 ha) absorbs significant excess carbon dioxide (estimated at 516,380 tons of CO₂/year), thus alleviating the effects of global warming, as well as producing some 375,400 tons of oxygen per year.

The region also contributes more than seven billion dollars annually to the national economy from its agriculture and livestock activities. This should not be sacrificed for the transient gains of mining operations (projected to last about 15 years, but physically transforming the landscape and ecology forever). If Alamos Gold and the other companies with interests in the region start mining operations in the area, approximately two million trees will be cut and the whole ecosystem will be destroyed; the water that local people use for agriculture and potable water will be used for mining activities, and eventually, because of the probable cyanide and heavy metal contamination, the well-being of the whole community will be in jeopardy.

Alamos Gold Inc.

Alamos Gold Inc. has gold mining operations in Canada and Mexico, and a project under development in the USA, as well as the Kirazlı, Çamyurt, and Mount Ađı projects in Turkey through its wholly owned subsidiaries Dođu Biga and Kuzey Biga Mining.

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