

● INTERIOR ALASKA

Entrepreneur answers call of the wild

Gold-seeking couple in Chicken captures national hardrock mining award; incorporates tourism business into reclamation vision

By ROSE RAGSDALE

For Mining News

When a University of Alaska Fairbanks professor moonlighting as a consultant asked student Mike Busby to drive out to a gold mine north of the city, Busby had no idea the day trip would change his life.

It turned out the mine was looking for workers and hired Busby on the spot. That opportunity in the mid-1970s thrust Busby into a gold mining career in Interior Alaska that has lasted for 30 years. Along the way, Busby met his wife, Lou, and raised two children.

In 1990, the Busbys began mining a site about 180 miles east of Fairbanks on Chicken Creek, first as lessees on mining claims, and since 1998, on patented claims they own.

Sixteen years later, the Busbys have grabbed the national spotlight as winner of the federal government's national 2006 Hardrock Mineral Award for Reclamation and Sustainable Development in the small operator category. The distinction, bestowed annually since 2003 by the Bureau of Land Management, is one of four national awards that the agency presents to recognize outstanding efforts to implement the principles of sustainable development.

This is the second consecutive year that an Alaska firm has won the award in small operator category, which recognizes achievements in environmental stewardship of operators with fewer than 15 employees. Last year, "Diamond" Jim Olmstead, who has mined gold on Gold Creek off the Dalton Highway since 1996, won the honor.

Similar to the U.S. Department of Interior's awards for excellence in coal mining reclamation, the hardrock mining awards recognize industrial and metallic minerals firms as well as sand and gravel operators.

Sustainable mineral development is a concept the United States and 192 other countries adopted to balance environmental, economic, and social considerations in planning for mining operations.

Coeur Alaska Inc.'s Kensington Gold Mine in Juneau won the 2006 award in the community outreach and economic security category, Meridian Gold's Beartrack Mine Project near Salmon, Idaho, snagged the environmental award and Idarado Mining Co., a subsidiary of Newmont Mining Co., near Telluride, Colo., picked up the mineral director's honor.

Model operation

The Busbys, doing business as GeoQuest and Chicken Gold Co. at the Chicken Creek Mine in Chicken, Alaska, stood out this year among contenders for the small operator award as an "example of the use of Best Management Practices by a small operator," BLM said in a statement.

Their efforts emphasized principles of environmental stewardship and economic sustainability, the agency said.

"Like the Hardrock Environmental Award, this award recognizes operators who have demonstrated continuous



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or repeated efforts to successfully meet or exceed federal, state or local reclamation requirements," BLM said.

"The Busbys view their mining operation as a temporary use of the land. Their goal was to conduct a surface mining operation that would retain a diverse landscape, minimize post-mining erosion, protect the surface-water hydrology and preserve greenbelts and wildlife habitat within the mine footprint," the agency said.

The couple segregated and stockpiled all excavated materials while they were mining the site to use in its reclamation and designed and built a zero-discharge water recycling system that can function throughout the planned mine life. By doing this, GeoQuest and Chicken Gold Co. minimized the impact of their operations on the environment, BLM said.

Public invited

The Busbys' success is evident by the large number of annual visitors to the post-mine development known as the Chicken Gold Camp & Outpost. Due to careful and well-planned reclamation, visitors have no idea that any



This series of photos shows reclamation efforts from 2000 to 2004 that turned part of the mine into a campground.



mining has ever been conducted on the land, BLM said.

During the active mining operation, the public also was encouraged to view the mine. To facilitate safe access, the company identified public trails with signs to direct foot traffic and explain the operations. More public involvement has been encouraged through creation of a gold-panning facility with material supplied from the mine and instruction provided for novice panners, the agency added.

Mike Busby said the award reflects a lifetime spent doing the things that he and his wife love.

"I kind of stumbled into the mining business. I'd been involved in mining in Alaska and the Yukon Territory for several years before I started mining in the Chicken area," he said in a recent interview. "I was an anthropologist by training, but I was drawn to mining by the romantic lure of exploring the wilderness for gold."

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RECLAMATION

Spice of life

That was 27 years ago, but the small miner's lifestyle charmed the Busbys, especially Mike.

Today, the Busbys' May-October operation encompasses a national historic site, a tourism business, an operating mine and the old Pedro Gold Dredge on Chicken

Creek. They spend the off-season in Homer.

Mining at Chicken Creek requires work in numerous disciplines, including geology, hydrology, plumbing, welding and more recently, history and stewardship of the land, Busby said.

"I like the variety and the outdoor environment. Otherwise, I don't think I would have stayed with it," said the Colorado native who came to Alaska in 1972.

The operation also presents tough logistical challenges. The nearest supply stop,

Tok, is 78 road miles away, and Fairbanks, the nearest city, is a 300-mile trek one way.

"We supply our own electricity and water. We have no telephones, and we bring in everything from food for the café to our fuel," Busby said.

Expansion under way

This season, the Busbys employed three full-time workers and one part-timer to run the tourist camp and expand the facilities.

"We are currently adding ... showers

and cabins for visitors who don't have RVs and expanding the café," Busby said. "And we're doing a remodel on the dredge to accommodate tours and we're adding historic pieces to the park."

While gold production varies greatly from year to year at GeoQuest, Busby said the bulk of the operation's income comes from mining.

"It pays for the tourism business," he said. "Our livelihood until four years ago was entirely from mining. I'd say we're a sizable 'Mom and Pop.'" ●