Governor: Science next year at Homestake

Lead turns out for community celebration

By Bill Harlan, Journal staff

LEAD -- Gov. Mike Rounds told 600 celebrating picnickers in Lead that he expected underground science to be under way at the Homestake gold mine by this time next year, but he added a word of caution.

Cole Royal, 7-1/2 months, and his mom, Elizabeth Royal, follow her grandfather, Gary Goodrich, her daughter, Deanna Royal, 7, and son Angelos, 5, through the buffet line Tuesday evening at a picnic in Lead to celebrate the selection of the Homestake gold mine as the preferred site for a national underground laboratory. (Bill Harlan, Journal staff)

"We've got a great opportunity ahead of us, but we haven't accomplished anything yet," Rounds said Tuesday evening.

The governor spoke at a community celebration of the National Science Foundation's selection of Homestake, closed since 2001, as the site for a proposed national underground science laboratory.

The free picnic and dance at Manuel Brothers Park near the mine's giant Open Cut was paid for by the Lead Chamber of Commerce and Black Hills Vision, a regional development group based in Rapid City.

The NSF awarded a consortium of scientists up to $15 million over the next three years to develop the Homestake proposal.

The state of South Dakota has committed another $115 million to the project, including a $70 million donation from Sioux Falls philanthropist T. Denny Sanford.

The South Dakota Science and Technology Authority already has re-entered the mine, which was sealed shut in 2003. Now, technicians are racing to begin pumping out water that has been slowly filling the mine for four years.

Rounds said he expected experiments to be operating 4,850 feet underground at Homestake by next year as part of the state's plan to open an "interim" underground laboratory -- which could operate well in advance of an NSF decision whether to build an even deeper lab at Homestake 7,400 feet underground. The deeper lab, which would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, could take years to build and will require the approval of the White House and Congress.

"It's synergy," state Sen. Jerry Apa, R-Lead, said. Experiments at the interim lab will help demonstrate the viability of a deeper lab at Homestake.

University of Pennsylvania physicist Ken Lande, who originally proposed a Homestake lab seven years ago, said he was more confident than ever that the deep lab will eventually be built. "The direction Congress is headed, I'm pretty optimistic," Lande said.

Physicists use deep labs to protect ultra-sensitive experiments from background cosmic radiation, but other scientists could use Homestake, too.

South Dakota School of Mines & Technology geologist Colin Paterson, who also attended the celebration, said he was already working with 30 scientists from four countries on research to discover why Homestake, which operated for more than 125 years, was so rich in gold. "We still don't know that," he said.

Most of the picnickers were neither scientists nor government officials.

Gary Goodrich, who worked at Homestake for 22 years as a draftsman, attended the celebration with his granddaughter and three great-grandchildren. Goodrich said the deep lab at Homestake represented a future for Lead. "It's not going to happen all at once, but over a period of years, this could be great for the community."