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Comment On The F3 Gold Mining Project / Hells Canyon Ranger District

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Our home is in the [REDACTED] bordering the Black Hills National Forest. F3 Gold mining from Minneapolis MN has claims ½ to 1 mile away from our subdivision. We retired to Custer 15 years ago after regularly vacationing at Custer State Park. The Park and beauty of the Black Hills Forest were what attracted us to Custer. We had traveled extensively looking at towns and areas for our retirement home.

I love hearing the wind blow thru the Ponderosas, the shrill cry of Red Tail Hawks overhead, and howling coyotes roaming the neighborhood. Our Forest Roads have seasonal closures as we are in an Elk Management Area. Elk, Mountain Lion, Deer and Turkey cross our property regularly. Cattle graze and drink the stream and spring water regularly over the summer. We enjoy hiking in the Forest year around. The Black Hills Forest is a beautiful peaceful place, silent in the winter snow.

Once F3 Gold starts drilling, we expect many areas will be made inaccessible to the public. Forest Rd. 654, Wabash Rd. and new access roads will be busy with truck and equipment traffic, instead of Turkey, Deer and Mountain Lion hunters and dispersed campers. All of us, locals and visitors, will no longer have quiet enjoyment of our publicly owned Black Hills National Forest. We will experience 24 hour drilling rig noise, lights, traffic, dust, and no doubt trash in our treasured Forest. Crow Creek lies below our home and flows parallel to the forest boundary, and French Creek is ½ mile up the road. The well water in our subdivision is tasty and of good quality. If the planned gold exploration leads to mining, the run off will flow down hill into the creeks and groundwater.

F3 Gold's website touts environmental responsibility, love of the outdoors, and the beautiful Black Hills. That being said, there is no Environmental Impact Study or Statement underway. They will operate under a less restrictive Categorical Exclusion granted by the National Forest. How is that possible in this day and age, for a resource as unique and valuable as the Black Hills Forest; that generates billions of state tourism dollars? By the way F3 Gold did not reply to questions I asked on their website, nor did they answer any questions at the public meeting. The Forest Service District Ranger allowed no presentation or opportunity for them to address our questions and concerns. In fact the F3 Gold representatives ducked out early at the meeting.

We found out Feb. 17, 2023 at the 1st Public Meeting that the Custer project start date is May 23; less than 3 months notice if you plan to list, sell and move. The Forest Service and F3 Gold have been collaborating since 2017 regarding mining in The Black Hills, while F3 Gold has been greasing the wheel with state and federal legislators, and The School of Mines. There should have been at least 6 months notice from the Forest Service. The 1st official scoping letter for the Hells Canyon Ranger District is dated September 8, 2020.

We are asking for an Environmental Impact Study, followed by an Environmental Impact Statement. If the project proceeds; instead of 24 hour drilling, we request drilling to be limited to a 12 hour shift 6 AM to 6 PM; for a break in activity and noise to enjoy grilling out on a summer evening. We think it is reasonable for Residential Developments to be afforded a 3 mile buffer from all mining operations in the National Forest, so that noise and activity would not be a major problem. Times have changed since mining operations operated in the Black Hills. There are more residences and private wells next to the Forest boundary. Those residents have paid premium prices and high real estate taxes for the land they live on. I wonder if my Real Estate Taxes will go down as my property value decreases approximately 19 to 27% depending on what the mining phase is? Worst case scenario my well goes bad and my home value dumps into no man's land.

Looking at the bigger picture, the future of the beautiful Black Hills National Forest is looking grim. There are over 11,000 mining claims and a New Load Claim Area of over 33,155 acres registered with the BLM. From Uranium to Lithium, we are at the brink of a Modern Day "Gold Rush". But instead of Pick Ax work a 150 years ago still evident in the Forest; picture what will happen when heavy industrial equipment drills holes diagonally for 3000'. Think about the possibility of radon being released into the water and air. Let's not forget the dangerous chemicals necessary to mine the minerals ending up in our water sources; the tree and foliage destruction harmful to livestock and wildlife habitat.

There is Claim after Mining Claim on the BLM Map, No End in Sight; for the Forest Service has said: We can not stop the mining! Please phone our State and Federal Representatives, and ask for modifications to The 1872 Mining Act. Ask them to Protect and Preserve our Black Hills National Forest; which generates billions in tourism dollars to the state of South Dakota.

Hard Rock mining is the number 1 source of toxic pollution per the EPA; 40 % of Western watershed and headwaters is already polluted by mining. Earthworks stated that gold mining is the most destructive type of mining in the world. It can take decades to centuries to recover ground water levels affected by mining. Is this the future we envision for Custer and our beautiful Black Hills Forest?

Susan Weber
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