

20 June 2023

Black Hills Group/South Dakota Chapter of the Sierra Club, P.O. Box 1624, Rapid City, SD 57709

Dear Supervisor Karchut,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the support of the Sierra Club for the Bureau of Land Management and USDA National Forest Service proposed mineral withdrawal.¹ Our main points are these:

1. We support the proposed mineral withdrawal around parts of Pactola Reservoir.
2. We acknowledge that the proposed action is for protection, not resource extraction, and therefore agree that an Environmental Assessment is sufficient.
3. We recognize the need to complete the study of the proposed area efficiently.
4. We trust, however, that the study will update the underlying sources that did not take current information into account for the preliminary decision, Environmental Assessment & Finding of No Significant Impact.²
5. We will continue to advocate for a larger withdrawal, preferably the entire Rapid Creek Watershed. In the best circumstance, why not a withdrawal from extractive activities for the entire Black Hills?

Who We Are

The South Dakota Chapter of the Sierra Club was established in 1972 when Sam Clauson organized a group to stop a proposed tramway that would have taken passengers to the top of Black Elk Peak (now in the federally protected Black Elk Wilderness). Sam's activities were the birth of the Sierra Club Chapter in South Dakota, and he still serves on our Black Hills Group executive committee.

Today our group fights for clean water, advocates sustainable agriculture, works to protect the Black Hills National Forest (BHNF), and lobbies for conservation and environmental legislation.

The purpose of the South Dakota Chapter of the Sierra Club and its Black Hills Group is to explore, enjoy, and protect the earth's wild places. Our members use the outdoors and the wild country of the Black Hills and Northern Great Plains for recreation and renewal. We rely on the watershed of Rapid Creek for our drinking water, agricultural, and recreational activities. The

¹ Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. Notice of application for Withdrawal and Notification of Public Meeting, Pactola Reservoir—Rapid Creek Watershed; South Dakota. 88 Fed. Reg 17006 (March 21, 2023).

² (The F3 Gold, LLC Jenny Gulch EA was prepared without consideration of executive orders, revised regulations, climate change guidance, CEQ guidance on purpose and need, tribal consultation and numerous other factors, including decades-old forest plan documents, out-of-date status and trends of sensitive and endangered species, and "Unknowns." See, e.g., Black Hills Group Comments, 22 August 2022, Objection to pre-decisional FONSI.

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knowledge that healthy environments and intact wild country exist, sustains us. Our members want to practice and promote the responsible use of Earth's ecosystems and resources. And to that end we work to educate and use grassroots activism to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment.

My name is Suzanne Iudicello Martley. My family has lived in South Dakota and recreated at Pactola Reservoir for four generations. My husband camped at the ghost town of Pactola/Camp Crook (1875-1950s) as the dam was under construction. He and his father fished there; we have picnicked, paddled, swum, fished, and played at Pactola with our children and grandchildren.

As the representative for the Sierra Club's ongoing participation in a local, grassroots campaign to protect the Rapid Creek Watershed, I am writing on behalf of our team: Guy Larson, Chapter Chair, Susanne Skyrn, Vice Chair, Sandra Seberger, Chair of the Black Hills Group, and Jay Davis, who in 2020, brought up the idea of protecting the watershed through the conservation goal of "30x30." Thirty-by-thirty (30x30) refers to efforts by the global community to conserve 30 percent of terrestrial and aquatic habitat by 2030. The U.S. adopted the goal as official policy in 2021.³ (And yes, we know it is anathema to many of our neighbors.)

Why We Care

The Chapter represents more than 1,000 active members, and almost 13,000 additional members, donors, and supporters in South Dakota. They and their families and friends use the BHNf for camping, hiking, fishing, photography, snowshoeing, skiing, hunting, viewing wildlife, picnicking, botanical and geological studies, biking, and orienteering. Their uses of the BHNf are as diverse as their interests. Many supporters of the coalition to protect the Rapid Creek Watershed earn their living through outdoor recreation professions, businesses, and jobs.

In 2019, American Rivers declared Rapid Creek in the Black Hills one of the 10 most endangered rivers in the nation because of increased gold exploration and proposed mining development. Ongoing and proposed new activity threatens sacred sites, fish, and wildlife habitat. The area is the birthplace of the Oceti Sakowin (the Great Sioux Nation), which encompasses the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota peoples, who deem the hills "The Heart of Everything That Is." The watershed provides drinking water to the state's second largest municipality, Rapid City, Ellsworth Air Force Base, and downstream agricultural irrigation all the way to the Cheyenne River. It provides the surface water that recharges the region's aquifers. The outdoor recreation activities that take place in this watershed generate employment, business income, and more than half the sales tax revenue of Lawrence and Pennington Counties. Population growth and

³ Executive Order 14008 (2021). Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad. White House Briefing Room, "Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad," 2021, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/>

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development are already straining our capacity to ensure a supply of clean water to communities in the watershed, including a major expansion at Ellsworth Air Force Base.

Our Long-term Goal

In 2020, a coalition of environmental groups, clean water advocates, Indigenous people's organizations, and outdoor recreation businesses mounted a campaign to seek protection of the Rapid Creek Watershed as a Forest Service recreation area.⁴ The ultimate goal is to have the federally-controlled surface and subsurface lands within the area (US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Reclamation) subject to a congressionally legislated mineral claim withdrawal. The Rapid Creek watershed west of Rapid City in the Black Hills is approximately 198,000 acres. As you know from permit applications, more than 280,000 acres of the Black Hills — more than 18% of all the land in the Black Hills — have been claimed by gold exploration companies, and permit requests continue to be filed. In contrast, *less than one percent of the BHNF is classified for recreation with mineral withdrawal.*

We support the proposed withdrawal, but ask that the agencies recognize that the inflow from above the reservoir, and the outflow below the reservoir *will not be protected* — not the water, not the cultural and natural resources, not fish and wildlife habitat.

Tributaries upstream from Pactola flow into and out of Deerfield Reservoir before they get to the proposed withdrawal. All that water, regardless of the withdrawn 20,000+ acres around Pactola, flows into Rapid Creek below the dam. The Creek then charges the entire watershed's aquifers, described by hydrologists as a “giant sponge” of subsurface rock formations from which many residents, including the City of Rapid City, draw their water.

The BLM, Bureau of Reclamation, and BHNF can impose liability on exploration and mining operations, but the city cannot. Nor can the existing water treatment infrastructure handle any of the potential pollutants that could enter Rapid Creek from exploration or mining.

We have raised all these issues since the initial announcement of the F3 Gold LLC Jenny Gulch application. We commented at scoping, we requested a full Environmental Impact Statement, we objected to the Preliminary Decision, the Environmental Assessment, and the Finding of No Significant Impact. We had the opportunity to offer possible resolutions to our objections. (Each of the referenced documents has been uploaded). We are appreciative that a possible resolution is a partial mineral withdrawal.

But we will not be satisfied.

⁴ Rapid Creek Watershed Recreation Area Act (2021). Available at https://www.rapidcreekwatershed.org/uploads/1/3/2/4/132414118/rcwa_legislation_withmap_3-2022.pdf

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We have already commented and will continue to advocate for more attention to water protection in the current Forest Plan Revision process,⁵ we will press for more recreation and protected areas on the Forest, and we will continue to push for congressional designation of a watershed-wide recreation area.

We believe that protection of the Rapid Creek Watershed in the Black Hills National Forest meets not only the Administration's climate and public lands goals, it is among the statutory purposes and duties of the Forest Service, which have — for more than 150 years — taken back seat to mining.

- It conserves large intact landscapes and wildlife corridors, including habitat for endangered species.
- Withdrawal of these wild lands from mining is a land conservation strategy that contributes to climate solutions as well as clean water, public health, and the forest.
- The designation supports the conservation and stewardship vision and priorities of the Oceti Sakowin.
- The proposed recreation area encompassed by the watershed — because it is easily accessible and low cost — is widely used by a diverse array of people from communities throughout the Black Hills, South Dakota, and nearby states.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We look forward to hearing the results of the study period, and are counting on updated information about a rapidly changing forest that has not had informed management for far too many years.

Respectfully,

Suzanne Iudicello Martley
Executive Committee Member, Black Hills Group Sierra Club
Team Leader, Sierra Club Chapter, Our Wild America Rapid Creek Watershed Campaign

⁵ [Black Hills National Forest Seeks Comments on Forest Plan Revision Draft Assessments](#), 17 June 2022. Accessed 7 July 2022.