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May 12, 2021

Ms. Colleen Garcia  
Inyo National Forest  
Minerals Program Manager  
351 Pacu Lane, Suite 200  
Bishop, CA 93514

*Submitted via project website comment form and email.*

RE: LONG VALLEY EXPLORATION DRILLING PROJECT PROPOSED BY KORE USA LTD. (KORE MINING).

Dear Ms. Garcia,

The Eastern Sierra Land Trust ("ESLT") appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Long Valley Exploration Drilling Project proposed by Kore USA Ltd. ESLT has a deep engagement and interest in protecting the scenic, agricultural, natural, recreational, historical, and watershed values of the Eastern Sierra in general - and Long Valley in Mono County specifically. Each of these resources and values is potentially affected by the proposed Project. Additional review, consultation, and stakeholder engagement is needed to ensure that these potential Project impacts are adequately addressed.

This comment letter addresses a number of key issues regarding the Long Valley Exploration Drilling Project, including: 1) the importance of a thorough and rigorous environmental review and public participation process, 2) impacts to important species including the Bi-State sage-grouse and mule deer, 3) the necessity of full and meaningful Tribal consultation, and 4) an adequate evaluation and mitigation of any associated fire risk. While our comment is focused on these four areas, we also want to comment that the full impact of this Project on Long Valley's natural, scenic and economic values needs to be appropriately considered. If the Project moves forward, all appropriate mitigation measures should be taken to protect these important values.

In submitting these comments today, the ESLT also wishes to incorporate by reference the comments submitted by the Mono County Board of Supervisors (May 4, 2021) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (May 3, 2021).

### 1. Adequate Environmental Review and Public Participation

Sound, balanced federal land management requires an appropriate and meaningful process of environmental review and public participation under the National Environmental Policy Act and other relevant laws and regulations. The ESLT shares the concerns raised in the comments submitted by the Mono County Board of Supervisors that additional details, analysis, coordination, and consultations are required for the careful review and possible implementation of this Project. As Mono County detailed in its May 4, 2021 comments, this Project does not qualify for a Categorical Exclusion:

There are two primary reasons a Categorical Exclusion is inappropriate for this proposal: first, that the indeterminate details may implicate State and County regulatory authority, and second, that the current details leave too many unanswered questions that may have significant environmental implications that would be bypassed for proper analysis.



Given the ecological, scenic, economic, and cultural values of the Project area, ESLT agrees with Mono County that a more thorough process of environmental review and public engagement is warranted for this Project.

## **2) Impacts to Important and Vulnerable Species**

As addressed in both the comments of the Mono County Board of Supervisors and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), Long Valley provides habitats and travel corridors that are particularly important for the health of populations of both the Bi-State sage-grouse (BSSG) and mule deer in the Eastern Sierra.

The ESLT has been an active member of the Bi-State Sage-grouse Local Area Working Group. The protection of vital BSSG habitats is key to the viability of this species and to the ecological health of Long Valley. ESLT urges that all appropriate steps be taken to assess the Project's potential impacts to BSSG populations and habitats. Following these thorough assessments, strong BSSG-related mitigation measures must be required for the Project to proceed.

As CDFW stated in its May 3, 2021 comment letter:

Comment: The Project has potential to impact the Bi-State sage-grouse through the direct loss and degradation of sagebrush-steppe habitat. Based on radio-telemetry data provided by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the Project area and vicinity is known to provide year-round habitat for the Bi-State sage-grouse. The sage-grouse is a sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.) obligate species because it depends entirely on sagebrush for foraging, nesting and brood rearing. Sagebrush loss and disturbance resulting from construction of drill pads and temporary access routes would remove traditional nesting habitat and fragment sage-grouse foraging and brooding habitat. Therefore, mitigation efforts should focus on reducing surface disturbance from access roads, drill pads and other infrastructure in effort to minimize the direct loss and disturbance of sagebrush habitat. For example, existing dirt roads in the Project should be used to the greatest extent possible when accessing proposed drill sites. In effort to avoid damaging nests and displacing nesting sage-grouse, vegetation removal in the Project area should not occur during the sage-grouse nesting period (15 March - 15 May).

## **3) Tribal Consultation**

It is vital, and legally required, that appropriate Tribal consultation should take place before the Kore Mining proposal is permitted to move forward. Long Valley has and continues to be an area used by - and of significance to - Indigenous peoples. The project site is within an area that is known to have Indigenous use and archeological and paleo-archeological resources going back for at least 10,000 years, if not longer. We are concerned by reports that there has been inadequate outreach and consultation to date with the tribes for whom this area has such rich and longstanding significance. Furthermore, any approved exploration activities must include the requirement of Tribal

monitors to be on site during drilling activities, at the expense of the Project's proponent. The Tribal monitors should also be present during the archeological survey.

#### **4) Increased Fire Risks**

Wildfire is an increasing concern in the Eastern Sierra. Wildfire poses threats to a wide array of natural resources and values, as well as to human life and property. Wildfires specifically pose significant threats to sage-grouse and their habitats in the west, as the CDFW states in their May 3, 2021 letter:

Comment: The Project could potentially increase the risk of wildfire in the South Mono PMU. Wildfire is considered the greatest threat to sage-grouse habitat in the west and is one of the primary factors linked to population declines. Catastrophic wildfire can impact sage-grouse habitat connectivity through the direct loss and fragmentation of large tracts of sagebrush habitat. Moreover, wildfire can result in the invasion of exotic annual grass species, such as cheatgrass. Wildfire mitigation should require a fire prevention plan that focuses on reducing the risk of wildfire through a program of training and strict enforcement.

In conclusion, the ESLT urges the Forest Service to thoroughly address a number of important issues regarding the Long Valley Exploration Drilling Project proposed by Kore USA Ltd, including: 1) the inadequacy of the Categorical Exclusion process and the importance of a rigorous environmental review and public participation process, 2) identification of impacts to important and vulnerable species including the Bi-State Sage-grouse and mule deer, 3) the necessity of full and meaningful Tribal consultation, and 4) an adequate evaluation and mitigation of the associated wildfire risk.

As previously noted, we concur with the comments provided by the Mono County Board of Supervisors (May 4, 2021) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (May 3, 2021). We also urge the Forest Service to ensure that the full impact of the Project on Long Valley's many natural, scenic and economic values be appropriately considered. If the Project moves forward, all appropriate mitigation measures should be taken to protect these important values.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these comments.



Kay Ogden  
Executive Director / CEO

CC: Lesley Yen, Supervisor, Inyo National Forest