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Stibnite Gold Project

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Sent via <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=50516>

Dear Supervisor Jackson:

The following are comments from Wilderness Watch on the supplemental draft environmental impact statement (hereinafter SDEIS) and its associated attachments and appendices for the Stibnite Gold Project. Wilderness Watch is a national nonprofit wilderness conservation organization dedicated to the protection and proper stewardship of the National Wilderness Preservation System. We also refer you to our earlier comments on the draft EIS. Many of those concerns we raised have not been addressed or only cursorily addressed.

Introduction

While there are numerous other negative consequences that would result from construction of this mine, these comments focus on the impacts to Wilderness from this massive industrial project on the edge of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. As noted in our last comments, the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and the contiguous Gospel-Hump Wilderness together form the largest single contiguous block of designated wilderness in the lower 48 states. These areas, in turn, are surrounded by roadless wildlands including other Wilderness. This is the largest complex of wildlands in the contiguous 48 states.

The SDEIS and associated materials are voluminous. The comment period is too short for such a massive proposal and occurs over the holidays. Thus, it would appear the Forest Service has intentionally done this to discourage public input and especially substantive input. The members of the public who own the national forests deserve and demand better.

Wilderness Analysis

Rather than looking at impacts to Wilderness as a whole, the SDEIS and supporting materials fragment the wilderness analysis. The Stibnite Gold Project Special Designations Specialist Report (SD) states:

Issue: The SGP could change the quality of wilderness character in designated or recommended wilderness areas.

Indicators:

*Distance of SGP facilities from designated or recommended wilderness.

*Distance of designated or recommended wilderness from sights and sounds of human activity.

*Change in opportunities for self-reliant recreation within designated or recommended wilderness.

SD at 26. See also SDEIS at 4-623. This downplays the threats to Wilderness by limiting those indicators and/or relegating wilderness impacts elsewhere in the SDEIS. For example, even the SDEIS admits impacts to

Wilderness are not confined to the Frank Church-River of No Return by mentioning potential air quality impacts to surrounding areas designated as Wilderness including the Selway-Bitterroot, Gospel-Hump, Sawtooth, Hells Canyon, and two of the three wildernesses in the Boulder White Clouds (See SDEIS at 3.3-2 and analysts beginning at 4-22)*. However, the analysis of the other areas only looks at Clean Air Act issues without an adequate analysis of impacts to Wilderness, thereby inappropriately conflating the requirements of the Clean Air Act with those of the Wilderness Act. Both sets of impacts should have been analyzed.

Furthermore, the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and seven other areas designated as Wilderness (see Figure 3.3-2) do not have a provision in their respective laws prohibiting the establishment of buffer zones. Because of this, the Forest Service is required to analyze the impacts to designated Wilderness from activities outside of the wilderness boundaries (See Izaak Walton League of Am., Inc. v. Kimbell, 516 F.Supp. 2d 982). Yet, the SDEIS does not discuss the interplay between the substantive requirements of the Wilderness Act, including preservation of wilderness character and the Forest Service's Manual Direction meant to do that by preventing degradation, and the recognized impacts on air quality from this proposal. The SDEIS simply and erroneously dismisses potential degradation in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness as minor without recognizing even minor degradation is antithetical to preserving wilderness character (SDEIS at 4-631).

Similarly, the SDEIS makes no conclusion as to whether the preferred alternative is consistent with the letter or spirit of the Wilderness Act regarding the indicators that are analyzed for the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. The agency has full authority to reject the preferred alternative based upon negative impacts to Wilderness. For example, the following four serious problems that come from the Burntlog route** in the preferred alternative illustrate the problems of this alternative:

*The SDEIS admits to additional impacts to the Wilderness in terms of wildlife displacement (SDEIS at 4-629), yearlong access in this remote area (SDEIS at 4-626), sediment damage to fisheries and water quality into the Wilderness (SDEIS at 4-631).

*The SDEIS notes a new road segment would be built in roadless country on the wilderness boundary (SDEIS at 4-627 and 4-628). While it is claimed the impacts would be 100 feet (ibid.) from the Wilderness, the small-scale maps in the SDEIS show it right on the boundary, which in this place is a ridge (see Figures 2-1 and 1-3). Further, the most logical location for the road would be on top of the extant pack trail, which dips in and out of the Wilderness. See <https://data.fs.usda.gov/geodata/rastergateway/states-regions/states.php> for the official Forest Service topo map of Chilcoot Peak showing the trail. The risk of inadvertently building part of this road in Wilderness is too great in this remote area.

*The SDEIS fails to quantify or mitigate against the increased probability of illegal motorized or mechanized use in the Wilderness. Having a high-standard road open year round right on the boundary of the Wilderness would likely increase illegal use summer and winter.

Simply put, the selection of the Burntlog route would violate the Wilderness Act.

The SDEIS does not analyze impacts to the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness or Gospel-Hump Wilderness downstream of the project area. The lower portion of the South Fork Salmon River is within the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and the Main Salmon below the South Fork Confluence forms the boundary between the two wilderness units. Water quality impacts in the upper East Fork of the South Fork will flow downstream.

Our past comments stated:

The DEIS makes a serious mistake adopting "the five qualities of wilderness character" as the way to analyze the impacts to the Wilderness (DEIS at 4.23-1). This ignores the fact that "wilderness character must be defined as a

coherent whole, in a manner that is not internally contradictory. It cannot be broken down into separate qualities." (Cole et al. 2015, emphasis added).

To reiterate, the SDEIS also cites to Landres and others who dissected and fragmented the eloquent whole of Wilderness. It was an exercise in reductionism. From our communications with Landres, the main purpose behind this exercise was to be able to objectively monitor changes in wilderness character in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Hence, the protocol titled Keeping it Wild and Keeping it Wild 2. While this process to define wilderness character was undoubtedly a well-intended effort, as time has passed, it is clear it has serious negative unintended consequences for Wilderness. Other wilderness specialists and researchers recognize these failings in their pointed critique (see Cole et al. 2015). A prime example of a negative consequence is the erroneous idea that managers could trade off various components of wilderness character against each other, thereby reducing the Wilderness Act into a procedural process via an EIS and/or MRDG, rather than a substantive law. This management mindset, which effectively repeals and rewrites the Wilderness Act, is a recent development. It is doubtful even those wilderness specialists who defined wilderness character in a reductionist manner would concur with using it to make tradeoffs between various components of wilderness character.

Conclusion

The SDEIS is little better than the flawed DEIS. The impacts to Wilderness, endangered species, water quality, air quality require the Forest Service to reject this permit. Instead, the agency should require the company to clean up the legacy mining damage it inherited. Please keep us updated on this proposal.

Sincerely,
Kevin Proescholdt
Conservation Director
Wilderness Watch

* Figure 3.3-2 erroneously omits the Monument Rock, North Fork John Day, North Fork Umatilla, Wenaha-Tucannon, Welcome Creek, Rattlesnake, and Jim McClure-Jerry Peak Wildernesses from the map and fails to label Cecil D. Andrus-White Clouds and Hemingway-Boulder Wildernesses all within the Far Field Boundary.

** Aside from the damage to Wilderness, it would appear the Idaho Roadless Rule intended to limit road construction for "Minerals activities in Idaho Roadless Areas." (emphasis added) 36 CFR 294.25. See also 36 CFR 294.23. The proposed mine itself is outside of roadless areas with extant road access.