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Comments: Rare earths, lithium, graphite, cobalt, nickel, and other critical are used in everything from smartphones to electric vehicles to state-of-the-art fighter jets like the B-21 Raider. Without increased domestic sources of these minerals, and other vital minerals like copper, iron, silica sand, and precious metals, the United States cannot sustain our scientific, military, and economic progress. Not only is there no domestic supply for many of these critical minerals, companies are prevented from looking for them (although they do exist here in South Dakota).

Currently, the United States must import the vast majority of its critical minerals from overseas, including heavy reliance on China, Russia, and other unfriendly regimes. China currently controls more than 92 percent of the supply chain for rare earth magnets that are critical components in missiles, firearms, radar, and stealth aircraft. Not only is this overreliance on imports from hostile governments dangerous, but it is also hypocritical to outsource our mineral requirements to countries that do not have strong laws to protect human health and the environment.

Cobalt mines in Democratic Republic of Congo produce more than 70% of the world's cobalt and operated with little or no government oversight. The well-documented result has been widespread human rights violations and environmental devastation. By contrast, a mining operation in the United States must comply with dozens of State and Federal laws to protect human health, dignity, and the environment. The United States is arguably the safest and most environmentally protective jurisdiction in the world for mining.

Nearly 1/3 of Federal lands, including National Parks and Monuments, wilderness, and Federal wildlife refuges, have previously been determined off limits to mineral development. By law, the remainder of Federal lands are required to be managed for multiple uses, including hunting, recreational use, timber, and mineral development. Before additional public lands are withdrawn from mineral exploration and development, the Bureau of Land Management and the United State Forest Service should complete full Environmental Impact Statement analysis to justify the important decision to exclude future mineral extraction.

Targeting the complete elimination of a specific industry on designated multiple-use lands without due process is a dangerous precedent to set and ignores the procedural requirements of NEPA. What specifically is the "Purpose and Need" of this proposed action by the USFS? Lacking an actual proposed mine plan for this mineral withdrawal area, how will the agency identify and define alternatives to the proposed action? And more specifically, how will the agency identify and define impacts from both the proposed action and the defined alternatives? Will the environmental impacts from skyrocketing development of subdivisions and vacation homes and the ever-increasing ATV/UTV use in the same areas and wildlife habitat be fully studied as cumulative effects under NEPA? These questions and more like it REQUIRE a robust public scoping and FULL evaluation and disclosure of all impacts to the human and socioeconomic environment under an Environmental Impact Statement.

For these reasons, I am opposed to the Forest Services' March 21, 2023, proposal to withdraw 20,574 acres of National Forest System lands in Pennington, County South Dakota for from mineral location.