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Comments: I fully support the U.S. Forest Service's request that 20,574 acres of NFS lands be withdrawn (closed) to all forms of entry, appropriation, and disposal under the mining laws, mineral and geothermal leasing laws, and public land laws, subject to valid existing rights.

I could rehash the many arguments -- about the environment, aesthetics, outdoor recreation, sacred spaces, wildlife, grazing, tourism and so on -- that have been publicly aired about the importance of protecting the Rapid Creek Watershed, but although I agree with them, I will skip right to the common denominator.

The most basic fact is this: The watershed collects surface water and groundwater from the surrounding land and creeks that feed Rapid Creek, Pactola Reservoir and the underground aquifers that provide drinking water to Rapid City, its surrounding communities and Ellsworth Air Force Base.

The population here is growing, and a major expansion is underway at Ellsworth as it prepares for the new B-21 Raider stealth bomber and several thousand military and civilian workers and their families. All these people need clean water. Destroy or even compromise that, and not only will tens of thousands of people be harmed, our national defense could be put at grave risk.

It is my hope that the entire 190,000-plus acres of the Rapid Creek Watershed will soon be closed to mining and exploration for extractive purposes, but 20,574 acres is a laudatory start. Those of us who cherish this place and are concerned about preserving it for ourselves and the countless generations to come appreciate this courageous, well-considered request by the Forest Service.