

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/14/2025 2:44:25 AM

First name: Joanna

Last name: Nellans

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Hassayampa Mineral Withdrawal project on the Prescott National Forest (PNF). We live in Prescott, just a few miles north of the project area. We have been frequently using this project area for recreation for decades. That region is our favorite place to hike, swim, camp, forage, shoot photos of the wildlife and natural features, and take recreational drives. There are campgrounds, designated campsites and swimming holes all over this project area. Swimming holes in Arizona are rare and highly valued.

Prescott's economy has been dependent upon tourism for many decades now, not mining. The withdrawal area also is an incredibly important region for that tourism because most of Prescott's visitors come up to this mile-high region from the desert of the Phoenix metro area, and they want to play in the cool pine forest when they come here. The PNF to the south/west is the only public area close to Prescott containing pine forest and water. The proposed withdrawal area covers only 1/3 of 1% of the Prescott National Forest, so it does not impair multiple use.

Most importantly, this withdrawal area includes 16 miles of rivers and creeks that are critical to the survival of many imperiled species. In Arizona, 60-75% of the wildlife species depend on riparian areas, according to the Arizona Riparian Council, yet riparian areas cover less than 0.5% of the state because people have destroyed more than 90% of these riparian areas. For example, many Arizona rivers, river segments and wetlands no longer exist because buildings and human groundwater/surface water consumption have dried them up (yes, surface water and groundwater are vitally connected and interdependent). More watercourses and wetlands dry up every day, as Arizona is in the midst of a 27-year drought that has no end in sight. Many riparian species are on the verge of extinction.

We often see the polluted remains of past mining operations on the forest that were never required to conduct proper remediation, and some are relatively recent because the PNF and USFS have been quite short-handed on employees to conduct oversight for years. For example, the 1.2-million-acre PNF has had zero law enforcement officers on staff for years. Just in the last few years a Chinese mining company bought mining claims in the withdrawal region to mine gold and other minerals that could be used to produce weapons. These Chinese have been illegally discharging horrible chemicals into the Hassayampa River on the PNF from their "Gold Paradise Peak" operations. The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality has at least temporarily caused them to stop, but we don't know what will happen in the future, especially since the Chinese are outside of the U.S. jurisdiction. And the U.S. has no restrictions against the Chinese or any other country mining our precious resources for little or no U.S. royalties and taking those minerals out of the country! On top of that, our 1872 Mining Law places mining above all other uses on public lands and prohibits land agencies from rejecting any claim applications unless the areas have been officially withdrawn from mining. Many of them are in direct conflict with other prior longstanding uses, such as the Gold Basin mining project farther south of Prescott owned by a company from India. People have been swimming at a wonderful deep spot on the Hassayampa there for many decades, but now we have to navigate our way through the 250-acre Gold Basin mining area right next to the river to get to the nearby swimming hole.

Now we are terrified there will be more destruction and pollution at our favorite recreation areas because the Forest Service allowed the previous mining withdrawal in this project area to expire in 2019. We have asked how many new mining claims on how many acres have been filed in the former withdrawal area since the withdrawal expired in 2019. PNF Project leader Chris Welker told us during a public meeting on Dec. 17, 2024 that a "Minerals Potential Report" would be on the project website to answer those questions in time for us to use that information in our public comments. However, today (Jan. 13) is the deadline for public comments according to

the project website (we were told Dec. 17 that the deadline was Jan. 15) and there is no report on the website. When we found out today that the deadline is apparently two days earlier than we were told, we tried to call Mr. Welker but did not reach him.

We know many PNF and Bureau of Land Management officials are now working hard to try to quickly re-protect these critical riparian areas with a new withdrawal, and we appreciate that. But we need to understand how we got to this place so it doesn't happen again. When we asked PNF officials why it took 5-6 years to try to reinstate the withdrawal, we were told that this withdrawal (and other mining withdrawal areas such as the San Francisco Peaks and Oak Creek Canyon in Arizona that also expired) was the responsibility of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) regional office (RO). Numerous private citizens alerted PNF officials before 2019 that this expiration was coming. Did these PNF officials alert the RO? Why didn't the PNF and RO take action on this critically important issue for years? Was anyone held accountable for allowing new mining claims to be filed for years in these extremely popular recreation areas? Did the USFS conduct post-analysis into how this expiration happened and how to avoid it in the future, so it won't happen again? If not, we ask that such an analysis be conducted. The results of any analysis should also be posted on the Hassayampa Mineral Withdrawal project website and other public sites.

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