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Comments: To the Forest Service, Mystic Ranger District, regarding Pete Lien and Sons' proposed plan of operations to conduct exploration drilling southwest of Rochford, SD.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on scoping for Pete Lien & Son's Rochford Mineral Exploratory Drilling Project #67838. Please consider this comment as my official statement against this proposed project.

I am a stakeholder in this matter as an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota Nation and a citizen who lives, works, prays, gathers, and recreates in the Black Hills - or in Lakota language, the sacred He Sapa - of western South Dakota.

My reasons for opposing the project proposal include, but are not limited to, concerns regarding the adverse impacts the project would have on water, land, irreplaceable cultural and historical resources, and the unique visual characteristics and soundscape of the area used for prayer and ceremony. Additionally, there are law violations concerning Tribal and Treaty Rights, the lack of meaningful tribal consultation, and the impacts the project would have on public access to the area.

Within Section B of the Plan of Operations, "identify streams, creeks, or springs if known." This portion is left unaddressed. However, according to the map provided, this drilling project sits within a proposed Forest Service project called the Sawbuck proposal. This proposal states, "There are nine watersheds at the scale known as Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC-12) Watersheds within the overlapping Sawbuck project area, with all watersheds draining into Rapid Creek...Rapid Creek is the only municipal watershed in the project area. These watersheds are currently rated as "functioning at risk," based on eleven key factors: water quality, forest cover, and forest health." In the Forest Service's own words, "There are opportunities to improve watershed conditions for aquatic organisms, riparian wetland plants, and aquatic habitat, which currently vary from poor to good across the area."

The Sawbuck project consists of 134,210 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands in the central Black Hills of South Dakota. Its stated goal is "to enhance long-term forest health and resilience across a broader geographic area than previous efforts, optimizing limited planning resources and accelerating the pace and scale of restoration treatments."

The Forest Service Sawbuck proposal says, "Pe'Sla, a sacred site for the Sioux Tribes, lies at the heart of the Sawbuck project area. In a significant step toward honoring this heritage, the USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region, Black Hills National Forest, recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2024 with the Oceti Sakowin Great Sioux Nation Tribes. This MOU establishes a framework for co-stewardship of the Black Hills National Forest, fostering collaboration and shared responsibility."

Furthermore, "The Pe'Sla proposal has recently secured funding for the next four years, in partnership with a keystone partner, the National Baptist Convention (NBC), to support the preservation and restoration of this culturally significant area."

The Rochford Mineral Exploratory Drilling project contradicts the conservation and protection of this sacred Historic site, rare plant habitats, nesting habitats, and restoration efforts for forests, meadows, riparian zones, etc., being proposed by the Forest Service for this area. Honestly, the Forest Service has already conducted the work to provide all the evidence as to why this area of the central Black Hills is particularly unique, special and vulnerable, and is long overdue for protection and restoration.

This region of the Black Hills provides remarkable hunting, hiking, and recreation opportunities that this project would certainly disturb. It is a well-known migration corridor for elk and deer. The area consists of habitats for sensitive and/or endangered species such as the Northern long-eared bat (endangered) and tricolored bat (proposed endangered), the Black Hills Mountain snail and Suckley's cuckoo bumblebee, to name a few.

Additionally, the area within or near the proposed drill pads holds sacred significance for the Lakota people. For thousands of years, we have gathered ceremonially at the area known to my People as Pe'Sla, and it remains vital to our identity as a Nation of this land.

In conclusion, mining projects do not offer multi-use opportunities. Whether it involves exploration or actual mining, the process is loud, with lights and drilling occurring potentially 24 hours a day, and it destructively alters old-growth landscapes that have taken thousands of years to develop. Additionally, it uses water from unknown sources in quantities that any local citizens would consider inappropriate. Since the water source or usage amounts were not indicated in the POO, this estimation is based on similar projects. We live in a region with increasingly high fire risks, extended dry seasons, ongoing drought, and a growing population. We must halt these mining projects in the Black Hills and consider their long-term impacts on human and environmental health. The message is clear: the people who live here in the Black Hills do not want this. We oppose any further mining or exploration. Protect our water. Protect sacred sites. Honor the treaty of 1868.

I respectfully request that the Forest Service complete an Environmental Impact Statement and reject this proposal. Thank you.