

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 9/14/2026 3:50:54 PM

First name: Adam

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear District Ranger Pliley,

I am writing to urge you to complete a full Environmental Assessment before deciding whether this Exploration can proceed. I believe the current plan insufficiently addresses potential risks to our community, water quality, and threatened and endangered species.

As a life long Montanan I am deeply aware of the impacts mining can have on healthy headwaters habitat for river ecosystems and the long standing environmental disasters that are left by mining corporations that play a shell game with the mining site once all the valuable mineral have been extracted and the only thing remaining is the catastrophic environmental risk of the waste biproducts. When you contrast these costs and risk along side the value of tourism brought into the state it seems incredibly short sighted to risk that economic driver for the relatively short term benefits of a mine along with the very long term very real environmental risks. This projects has the potential impact pristine trout habitat supporting one of the most-fished Rivers in our state, not to mention the 1,400 family farms and ranches and 10 billion gallons of water delivered from Painted Rocks Reservoir. This represents a sustainable, \$80 million dollar recreation economy with and a rich local culture that values wildlife and natural resources. US Critical Materials' rare earth mine in the Headwaters of the West Fork could be disastrous to these qualities of life in the Bitterroot.

First, the proposal ignores the most common threats a mine poses to floodplains, wetlands, sensitive areas, and the special water source at Painted Rocks: acid mine drainage and polluted run-off from mined materials left on site. An Environmental Assessment would facilitate a complete evaluation of groundwater, stormwater, and local geology to fully understand risks and protections needed. A responsible proposal would present clear plans for eliminating the all-too-common occurrence of water encountering hazardous, long-lasting toxins. A 2024 report from USCM shows that disturbance of rock at Sheep Creek could risk exposure of threatening levels of asbestos, heavy metals, and radioactive materials. If mismanaged, these would put our waterways and our community's health at risk.

Secondly, proposed activities like rock blasting, storage and handling of waste rock, heavy helicopter and vehicle use, chemical use, and increased human presence are known to harass and affect survival of wildlife protected through the Endangered Species Act, including bull trout and grizzly bear. The Plan's vaguely described measures for preservation of these present species need stronger conditions, particularly since fish are not considered in the Plan and in light of heavy helicopter use.

Finally, the prospecting company, US Critical Materials emphasizes the need for robust community participation, and in the face of such great public controversy around this proposal, only an Environmental Assessment can fulfill this public promise. USCM CEO stated that "environmental stewardship is not an afterthought for this project; it's foundational," and that, "the responsible path forward is [not] automatic approval... it's disciplined, evaluated, grounded in science... and informed by the voices of the people who care most about this place." I fully agree.

Based on the extraordinary circumstances listed above, the Forest Service has the responsibility to conduct an Environmental Assessment before making a decision on whether to allow Exploration for Sheep Creek Mine to proceed.

Sincerely,

Adam de Yong