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Dear District Ranger Pliley,
The Sheep Creek Mine Exploration Plan is not suitable for analysis under a Categorical Exclusion. Many critical resources depend on an unpolluted West Fork and main stem Bitterroot watershed: pristine trout habitat supporting one of the most-fished rivers in
Montana, Painted Rocks Reservoir and the family farms and ranches that depend upon it, and the regions robust outdoor recreation economy. US Critical Materials rare earth mine in the headwaters of the West Fork threatens these resources and the quality of
life they support in the Bitterroot.
I am writing to urge you to complete an Environmental Assessment before deciding whether the proposed exploration plan can proceed. The current plan insufficiently addresses potential risks to local communities, water quality, and threatened and endangered
species.
First, the proposed plan ignores the most common threats this mine poses to water resources, including sensitive areas throughout the Bitterroot watershed 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, and spreading, hazardous, long-lasting toxins.
A 2024 report from USCM shows that disturbing the subsurface in the Sheep Creek project area could risk exposing dangerous levels of asbestos, heavy metals, and radioactive materials. If mismanaged, these would put the Bitterroot watershed and local community
health at risk.
Secondly, the Forest Service must analyze likely impacts to fish and wildlife and impose strong conditions to protect species. The proposed plan only vaguely described measures for protecting endangered species. I am concerned about the plans reliance on helicopter
use, and how this may affect wildlife. Likewise, I am concerned about how impacts to water quality will affect fish. Specific measures to protect fish are not provided in the proposed Plan, despite the presence of threatened bull trout.
Finally, the prospecting company, US Critical Materials emphasizes the need for robust community participation. Given the significant 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; its foundational, and that, the responsible path forward is [not] automatic approval its 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 legal and ethical responsibility

to conduct an Environmental Assessment before determining whether to allow the Sheep Creek Mine Exploration Plan to proceed.

Sincerely,

Mark Olinger