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First name: Ezra

Last name: Gary

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Dear District Ranger Pliley,

My name is Ezra Gary and I was blessed with the gift of being born in the bitterroot valley. Growing up as the son of an outfitter I not only got to experience the beautiful river that ran right near our house, but also it was and continues our livelihood.

This river has been my water source for the majority of my life as well as all my friends and family. This mine has the full potential to take everything that makes our home great away. Allowing this would not only be a crime against the people who live here,

but it would be a crime against the very nature that makes this place so special. I am deeply aware of all that depends on healthy headwaters habitat in the West Fork: pristine trout habitat supporting one of the most-fished Rivers in our state; 1,400 family

farms and ranches and 10 billion gallons of water delivered from Painted Rocks Reservoir; a sustainable, \$80 million dollar recreation economy; 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.

I am writing to urge you to complete an 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.

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, vaguely described measures for preservation of endangered species need stronger conditions, particularly in light of the heavy helicopter use in the plan and the presence of multiple listed wildlife species. Fish are not considered in the Plan, despite the presence of threatened bull trout.

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 of whether to allow Exploration for Sheep Creek Mine to Proceed.

Sincerely,

Ezra Gary