

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 9/14/2026 4:37:10 PM

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Dear District Ranger Pliley,

My name is Nicole Sugihara. In June 2024, after about 5 years of searching, my husband and I purchased a beautiful property here in the Bitterroot. When we purchased our property, we knew it was our "legacy property", a property that we could

create our new legacy for ourselves and our family in the future. One of the things we love about this place is the purity of life and nature that it offers. Over the past two years, we have opened Bitterroot Retreat and Adventures, LLC, and Lightweight Flyshop.

We remodeled 3 cabins on our property, providing a beautiful, cozy place for visitors to stay and enjoy the Bitterroot Valley; we have built and opened Stevensville's only fly shop, and created a serene healing area for my own Sound Healing work. My husband

also became a fly-fishing guide and plans to become an outfitter in another year.

We have fallen in love with the Bitterroot Valley and its people, and have created an incredible place for family, friends, and tourists. We have built a place where the Bitterroot community can come together, meet, play, and heal. We are

very proud of what we have accomplished in a short time here, and we want to protect this valley, river, fish, wildlife, and resources, now and in the future. We have every intention of continuing our businesses in this valley while helping to protect all

of our livelihoods. If the Sheep Creek Mine were allowed, it would put at risk all that we hold dear and devastate what we have worked so hard to create that relies on this valley's water, mountains, fish, and resources.

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 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 urge you to complete an Environmental Assessment before deciding whether this Exploration can proceed. 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 comprehensive evaluation of groundwater, stormwater, and local geology to

understand the risks and the protections needed fully. A responsible proposal would present clear plans to eliminate the all-too-common occurrence of water coming into contact with hazardous, long-lasting toxins. A 2024 report from USCM shows that disturbance of rock at Sheep Creek could expose 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 such as 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 the survival of wildlife protected under the Endangered Species Act, including bull trout and grizzly bears. 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. 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 deciding on whether to allow Exploration for Sheep Creek Mine to proceed.

Sincerely,

M. Nicole Sugihara, MS