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Dear District Ranger,

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Dear District Ranger Pliley,

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, 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.

Please excuse my use of a pre-written statement, I myself am not a well spoken person, but this statement covers my deep felt concerns regarding allowing this mine exploration to proceed without having an Environmental Assessment done first.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Annette Ferguson