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Bitterroot National Forest
West Fork Ranger District

Attn: District Ranger

[REDACTED ADDRESS]

[REDACTED ADDRESS]

RE: Comments on the Sheep Creek Exploration Project Plan of Operations

Dear District Ranger,

We are writing to express our strong opposition to the proposed Sheep Creek Mine project by US Critical Materials. We urge the Bitterroot National Forest Service to carefully consider the long-term environmental, public health, and economic consequences of

this project before approving any permits or allowing development to proceed.

The Bitterroot Valley is one of Montana's most treasured landscapes. Its clean rivers, pristine forests, abundant wildlife, and exceptional water quality support local communities, agriculture, recreation, and tourism. These natural resources are far more valuable

over the long term than the limited lifespan of a mining operation.

Our greatest concern is the potential impact on water resources. Mining activities can increase the risk of groundwater contamination, sedimentation, acid mine drainage, and the release of heavy metals into nearby streams and watersheds. Even with modern engineering

and mitigation measures, mining accidents and long-term water treatment challenges have occurred at numerous sites across the country. Once a watershed is contaminated, restoration can be extremely difficult, costly, and, in some cases, impossible.

The Bitterroot Valley depends on clean water for drinking, irrigation, fisheries, and recreation. Any degradation of water quality could have lasting consequences for residents, farmers, wildlife, and future generations.

We are also concerned about the project's potential impacts on public health. Increased dust, diesel emissions, noise, and potential exposure to hazardous substances could affect the health and quality of life of nearby residents. Heavy truck traffic and industrial

activity would fundamentally change the character of the surrounding area and may create additional safety concerns, especially for the children traveling to school each day. Their commute involves traveling West Fork Road, the same route of the transport

vehicles and will be exposed to dangerous dust and material on a daily basis during the school year.

The project also threatens important wildlife habitat and forest ecosystems. Habitat fragmentation, increased

human activity, and infrastructure development could negatively affect sensitive species and reduce the ecological integrity of the area. These impacts extend beyond the mine footprint and can persist long after mining operations have ceased. While we recognize the importance of securing domestic sources of critical minerals, these goals should not come at the expense of irreplaceable public lands, clean water, and healthy communities. Sustainable resource development must include careful consideration of cumulative environmental impacts and whether less damaging alternatives are available. We respectfully request that the Bitterroot National Forest Service conduct the most rigorous environmental review possible, fully evaluate cumulative impacts to the watershed and surrounding ecosystems, and prioritize the protection of the Bitterroot Valley's natural resources and the health of its residents. If these impacts cannot be avoided or adequately mitigated, and an adequate and realistic reclamation plan is not proposed and secured post project, we urge the Bitterroot National Forest Service to deny approval of the Sheep Creek Mine project.

Thank you for considering our comments and for your responsibility to protect our public lands for current and future generations.

Sincerely,

Ed and Tricia Etzold
47 Alta Meadow Trail
[REDACTED ADDRESS]