

DATE: September 14, 2026

TO: Dan Pliley, West Fork District Ranger
Bitterroot National Forest
6735 West Fork Road, Darby, MT 59829

SUBJECT: **Official Public Scoping Comments, Notice of Technical Deficiencies, and Demand for Environmental Assessment (EA) – Sheep Creek Rare Earth Exploration Proposal (Project #370721)**

FROM: Saundra Holloway (Yuma, Arizona)

Dear Ranger Pliley,

Please accept these official public scoping comments regarding the US Critical Materials (USCM) draft Plan of Operations for the Sheep Creek Rare Earth Exploration Proposal. I strongly object to analyzing this project under a Categorical Exclusion (CE Category USDA-32d). The presence of extraordinary circumstances under 36 CFR § 220.6(b)—including specially designated wilderness areas, threatened aquatic species, unanalyzed radiological hazards, underground blasting, and intensive low-altitude aviation—legally mandates the preparation of a full Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

1. DIRECT ENCROACHMENT ON SPECIALLY DESIGNATED LANDS AND WILDERNESS VALUES

The ten-square-mile project site sits immediately adjacent to the Blue Joint Wilderness Study Area and the Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness, while lying directly within the Allan Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area. Under 36 CFR § 220.6(b)(1), the presence of Congressionally designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, and roadless areas constitutes clear extraordinary circumstances. Operating heavy machinery, underground blasting, and low-altitude aviation directly degrades wilderness values—including silence, solitude, remoteness, and undeveloped roadless character—that the Forest Service is legally mandated to preserve.

2. EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES: THREATENED AQUATIC SPECIES AND STATEWIDE GENETIC SIGNIFICANCE

Proposed surface core drilling at Locations 3 and 4 sits directly within the riparian corridor of Sheep Creek. The West Fork Bitterroot drainage provides designated Critical Habitat for threatened bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and supports a unique, non-hybridized population of westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi*) of statewide genetic significance. Recirculating 8,500 gallons of water daily through unverified 10 × 10 × 6 foot sumps in a steep, flash-prone headwaters catchment introduces severe discharge risks. Subtracting required freeboard, actual sump capacity is insufficient for intense storm or snowmelt events, threatening critical streams with toxic drill-slurry runoff, suspended solids, and heavy metals.

3. INTERRUPTION OF USFWS GRIZZLY BEAR RECOVERY CORRIDOR AND REGIONAL WILDLIFE

The proposed site occupies a vital wildland migration corridor along the Idaho/Montana border that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan explicitly relies upon for natural population movement into the designated Bitterroot Grizzly Bear Recovery Area. Over 4,000 low-altitude helicopter flights and industrial operations will sever this at-risk linkage area, displacing threatened grizzly bears, Canada lynx, wolverines, and whitebark pine, as well as native Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, elk, mountain goat, and Northern Rockies fisher. Relying on informal visual observations by construction crews rather than mandatory pre-disturbance biological surveys or enforceable flight buffers violates basic wildlife protection standards.

4. UNANALYZED GEOCHEMICAL HAZARDS: ACID MINE DRAINAGE, ASBESTOS, AND RADIOLOGICAL OMISSIONS

The draft Plan proposes 45 core holes totaling up to 18,000 feet and underground blasting inside Adit 1 to extract 3,000 tons (6 million pounds) of bulk carbonatite ore. Carbonatite deposits in this region harbor sulfides, naturally occurring asbestos fibers, uranium, and thorium. The Plan of Operations completely omits baseline geochemical characterization, acid-generation testing, airborne dust containment protocols, or radiological screening for off-site transport along 30 miles of the West Fork Road. Leaving uncharacterized waste rock on site without baseline water testing upstream and downstream renders the administrative record legally deficient.

5. UNSUBSTANTIATED WATER LOGISTICS, INCOMPLETE FOOTPRINT FRAMING, AND IMPERMISSIBLE SEGMENTATION

Framing this proposal as a 0.3-acre surface disturbance misrepresents the true operational impact zone created by blasting, fuel storage, daily heavy-truck haulage, and aviation traffic. The Plan fails to identify the origin, water rights, or transport routes for imported drilling water, nor does it provide a complete water balance table. Approving exploration under a Categorical Exclusion impermissibly segments the initial phase of a commercial-scale rare earth mine development scheme, violating NEPA prohibitions against piecemeal review.

CONCLUSION AND RESERVATION OF RIGHTS

Because the proposal impacts designated Wilderness Study Areas, Inventoried Roadless Areas, a USFWS Grizzly Bear Recovery Corridor, threatened bull trout critical habitat, and radioactive carbonatite geology, the Bitterroot National Forest cannot lawfully rely on CE Category USDA-32(d). I urge the Forest Service to reject the CE determination and initiate a formal Environmental Assessment (EA) with full public involvement.

Participation in this scoping process serves to establish administrative standing and preserve all legal rights, appeals, and remedies regarding Project #370721. Submission of these detailed comments exhausts all available administrative procedures, ensuring that my right to pursue administrative objections, administrative appeals, and judicial review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) is fully preserved. I reserve the right to utilize all available administrative and legal means to enforce agency compliance and protect the natural resources of the West Fork Bitterroot watershed.

Thank you for incorporating these comments into the official administrative record for Project #370721.

Sincerely,

Saundra Holloway

Yuma, AZ 85365