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Lawsuit Challenges Gold Drilling in Sage Grouse Habitat in California's Eastern Sierra Nevada

Forest Service OK'd Gold Exploration Despite Harm to Endangered Fish, Sage Grouse

SACRAMENTO— Conservation groups [sued](#) the U.S. Forest Service today to stop exploratory drilling in California's eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains that threatens an endangered fish and a dwindling population of bi-state sage grouse.

"This drilling project will cause exactly the kind of noise and commotion that make bi-state sage grouse abandon their habitat. The Forest Service should absolutely know better," said Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's appalling that the Forest Service is willing to push these beautiful dancing birds closer to extinction for a toxic mine. We'll do everything possible to prevent another species from being lost forever, but we urgently need the court's help."

Today's lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Sacramento, says the Forest Service violated federal environmental laws by ignoring the potential damage from the Kore Mining project to Inyo National Forest's Long Valley area, including draining the streams where endangered Owens tui chubs live. The fish and its habitat are protected under state and federal endangered species laws.

"Degrading the Owens tui chub's streams threatens this endemic fish, which is already on the brink of extinction," said Laura Cunningham, California director at Western Watersheds Project. "The Forest Service needs to take a hard look at the potential for exploratory drilling to irreversibly damage hot springs hydrology as well as breeding and nesting habitat for dwindling populations of the bi-state sage grouse."

Bi-state sage grouse, whose numbers have drastically declined in the past decade, live next to the 12 proposed drilling pads, threatening the birds' survival.

The Inyo National Forest conducted the most cursory of environmental reviews — a categorical exclusion — which doesn't allow any public input and concluded no harm would be done by the project. Categorical exclusions are supposed to be reserved for

minor federal projects that will not harm the environment like rebuilding hiking trails, not drilling for gold in sensitive habitats.

“Long Valley is an important place that needs conservation protection, not a gold mine,” said Wendy Schneider, executive director of Friends of the Inyo. “The area provides critical wildlife habitat for struggling species, it is culturally significant to local tribes, and important for the recreational tourism economy in Mammoth. Further, the water in area is already overcommitted. Drilling activities will add to that burden and introduce the possibility of toxic contamination. The drilling proposal was strongly opposed by a majority in the community. The Forest Service should not have approved this proposal.”

Exploratory drilling is the precursor to a full-blown gold mine that could span more than 1,800 acres of this sensitive area in the eastern Sierra Nevada. In addition to destroying habitat for endangered species and sucking vast amounts of water from ancient aquifers, a gold mine would industrialize a landscape renowned for its majestic and scenic vistas and pollute pristine public lands.

“There couldn't be a worse project proposed in this sensitive area, and the Forest Service's approval of this project sets a dangerous precedent for our region,” said Kris Hohag, local tribal citizen and Eastern Sierra Senior Organizer for the Sierra Club. “Kore Mining is taking advantage of the flawed 1872 Mining Act that allows mining projects to profit from the destruction of our environment, and here in the eastern Sierra that means threats to our unique wildlife and the health of our water and cultural resources.”

The groups are represented by Roger Flynn of the Western Mining Action Project, Lisa Belenky of the Center for Biological Diversity, and Talasi Brooks of Western Watersheds Project.

The gold exploration project is proposed on land in Long Valley, California, with high cultural value to the Kutzadika'a Tribe of Northern Paiute, as well as to other Paiute and Shoshone people.

The [Center for Biological Diversity](#) is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

[Western Watersheds Project](#) is a nonprofit conservation group with over 12,000 followers, with field offices across the western U.S. We work to influence and improve public lands management throughout the West with a primary focus on the negative impacts of livestock grazing on 250 million acres of western public lands, including harm to ecological, biological, cultural, historic, archeological, scenic resources, wilderness values, roadless areas, Wilderness Study Areas and designated Wilderness.

Founded in 1986, [Friends of the Inyo](#) is a nonprofit grassroots environmental organization. Our mission is to protect and care for the lands of Payahuunadu, also known as California's Eastern Sierra. Our working area covers Inyo and Mono Counties,

stretching from Lone Pine to Bridgeport, including three national forests and two BLM field offices. On behalf our approximately, 3,000 members and supporters, we advocate for healthy environments across the diverse ecosystems that make up our working area. We also lead educational events and outings, including for local and visiting youth, and partner with federal agencies to engage in direct stewardship activities.

The Sierra Club was founded in 1892 and is the nation's oldest grass-roots environmental organization. Sierra Club's mission is to explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the Earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the Earth's ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and use all lawful means to carry out these objectives. The [Range of Light Group](#) is a group within the Toiyabe Chapter that covers the geographic region of Inyo and Mono Counties.