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Friends of the Inyo and Conservation Partners Prepare to Oppose Imminent Exploratory Drilling at Hot Creek; New Dedicated FOI Staff Added to the Effort; Community Events Coming

Canadian company KORE Mining, with permission from the U.S. Forest Service, may commence its exploratory drilling for gold in the Hot Creek area of Long Valley as early as September 1. But Friends of the Inyo and partnering environmental advocacy organizations, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, Sierra Club, and No Hot Creek Mine have locked arms in opposition to the project, which is sure to harm the ecological health of the Long Valley Hot Creek area and Mono County's recreational tourism economy.

Some Background

In September of 2021, the Inyo National Forest signed a Categorical Exclusion (CE) approving KORE Mining's exploratory drilling at Hot Creek.

One month later, Friends of the Inyo, together with the Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, and the Sierra Club, sued the U.S. Forest Service, saying the agency had ignored the proposed mining project's potential environmental degradation to Inyo National Forest's Long Valley area, including potential harm to a dwindling population of Bi-state sage grouse, and to the stream where endangered Owens tui chubs live.

The Forest Service concluded no harm would be done by the project following the CE—a type of cursory review reserved for minor federal projects, like rebuilding hiking trails or repaving parking lots. To qualify for treatment as a CE, projects must be completed within one year. In this case, however, the Forest Service approved a loosening of the one-year requirement, allowing the drilling by KORE Mining to be completed within one year, and the environmental remediation to be completed within an additional year. Should the KORE Mining project be allowed to proceed, it will set a precedent for the loose application of the one-year restriction, allowing many more extractive projects to gain approval with only the barest of environmental reviews, the plaintiff organizations highlighted.

Nevertheless, on March 9 of this year, a federal district court ruled to allow the drilling to go forward, a ruling that the four plaintiffs appealed on March 28.

Friends of the Inyo's Executive Director, Wendy Schneider, said, "Our decision, along with our partners, to appeal the trial court's determination that the approval of this project by the Inyo National Forest was lawful, when it clearly is not, was important for the protection of sensitive habitats and species across the American West. If allowed to go forward, this project will pave the way for a much-expanded application of projects that can proceed pursuant to a Categorical Exclusion, which provides only a minimum environmental review."

Preparing for the Good Fight Locally

As things stand now, KORE Mining can begin drilling as soon as Sept. 1, bringing 24/7 noise, light, and dust pollution to southern Mono County for about a year. This is unacceptable.

Therefore, in addition to pursuing the legal strategy described above, Friends of the Inyo has partnered with No Hot Creek Mine, providing funds to this Mono County-based organization, which has, from the start, effectively organized local opposition to the KORE Mining project.

As of July 1, Friends of the Inyo has added to our team Emily Markstein, one of the cofounders of the No Hot Creek Mine group, as our No Hot Creek Mine Campaign Organizer. This will enable Markstein, who has already garnered much local support for, and built momentum around, the No Hot Creek Mine effort, to devote even more time to the protection of Hot Creek.

"We are thrilled to add Emily to our team, to strengthen our work to protect the lands and waters of Inyo and Mono Counties," Schneider said of Markstein. "She brings passion for our lands, campaign expertise, and commitment to get the job done."

Markstein will play a key role in organizing volunteers to monitor KORE Mining's operations, to make sure the company stays within the bounds of its approved projects. Some examples of monitoring include making sure that KORE Mining vehicles drive within specified allowable speeds to limit dust, and that drilling operations do not exceed prescribed levels of noise (in decibels) to keep noise pollution at bay.

Also, Markstein is working on developing a number of outreach and educational activities for the coming months, most immediately:

- July 27/28 - *The Dirtbag Diaries* outdoor adventure and environmental conservation podcast will feature, in its upcoming episode, the efforts of Markstein and others to protect Hot Creek and Conglomerate Mesa from destructive mining. Listen to the podcast once it is released at dirtbagdiaries.com.

- July 29, from 6 to 8 p.m. - At Stellar Brew in Mammoth Lakes - FREE Screening of short local film *Sunrise Gold* as a launching point to begin a community conversation about how to best oppose imminent mining threats to Hot Creek and Long Valley.

Other events are planned for August through October but details have not yet been finalized. Visit FriendsoftheInyo.org/Events to stay up to date with all of Friends of the Inyo's upcoming public land protection, education and stewardship events, including efforts to protect Hot Creek. Upcoming events will be posted in chronological order once details are known.

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