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Stibnite Gold Mine Plan fails to address concerns about toxic mine pollution in Salmon River headwaters

McCall, ID - The Forest Service has released the [Final Environmental Impact Statement \(FEIS\) and Draft Record of Decision \(DROD\)](#) for the Stibnite Gold Project. The planned open-pit cyanide vat leach gold mine in Idaho's Salmon River Mountains would jeopardize public health and clean water, harm threatened species, violate Indigenous treaty rights, and permanently scar thousands of acres of public land in the headwaters of the South Fork Salmon River, a coalition of local and national conservation groups said.

“The Stibnite Gold Project risks irreversible harm to one of the nation’s most cherished and ecologically important river ecosystems. Given the extraordinary scale and location of the proposed development, it’s unacceptable that the FEIS only considers the mine applicant’s proposed mine plan and a no-action alternative,” said Zack Waterman, Northern Rockies Conservation Director for American Rivers.

The FEIS and DROD outline the Forest Service’s decision to authorize the 2021 Modified Mine Plan which was initially presented in the Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement in 2022. The Modified Mine Plan doubles the size of the existing disturbance to 3,265 acres and would excavate three open-pit mines. The proposed Yellow Pine pit would extend more than 700 feet beneath the riverbed of the East Fork South Fork Salmon River, requiring the river to be rerouted through a concrete tunnel during mining activities until the pit is eventually backfilled with mine waste.

“This decision is a grave disservice to the hundreds of people who voiced concerns about the cyanide vat leach mine, and it appears that the Forest Service has not made any substantive changes to the project,” said John Robison of the Idaho Conservation League. “The plan still involves excavating three massive open pits, punching in a road through three roadless areas and along the boundary of the Frank Church River of Return Wilderness, and filling Meadow Creek with toxic mine waste.”

The project also requires constructing an industrial ore-processing facility, burying pristine bull trout habitat beneath 100 million tons of toxic mine tailings, building miles of new access roads and electrical transmission lines through inventoried roadless areas, and providing on-site housing and services for hundreds of workers.

“While we are just getting started analyzing the FEIS and Draft Record of Decision, we know that the mine plan has not meaningfully changed,” said Nick Kunath, Conservation Director at Idaho Rivers United. “We are particularly concerned about increased water temperatures in watersheds that are home to Endangered Species Act-protected salmon, steelhead, and bull trout. We know that streamflows in the EFSS watershed will be reduced by up to 30%, and the removal of riparian shading will increase predicted stream temperatures by up to 6.6° C for up to 100 years. None of which accounts for the additional impacts of climate change.”

The South Fork Salmon watershed is a cornerstone of efforts to restore threatened Chinook salmon, steelhead trout, and bull trout. The Forest Service says the South Fork Salmon River contains the “most important remaining habitat for summer chinook salmon in the Columbia River basin.” Immediately downstream of the mine site, the South Fork Salmon River also provides world-class recreational opportunities for whitewater paddlers and anglers alike whose access and experience will undoubtedly be diminished by the proposed project.

“Perpetua is presently involved in three legal challenges to its air quality permit, water rights application, and 401 water quality certification. All three of these challenges are contesting and highlighting the callousness and indifference with which Perpetua plans to treat the river, the fish, human health, and the land, all under the banner of profits. All of the concerns raised in these challenges are unresolved in the FEIS,” said Mary Faurot Petterson, Save The South Fork Salmon Board member.

By the State of Idaho’s calculations, operations at the proposed mine will also emit millions of pounds of arsenic-laden dust per year posing additional environmental and human health risks for anyone recreating near, or traveling through the mine site. Several coalition groups continue to appeal the mine’s [air](#) and water pollution permit to properly address dust and arsenic emissions and water quality impacts.

“We remain deeply concerned about [mercury and arsenic pollution](#) from proposed mining operations, and the risks to public and ecological health,” said Bonnie Gestring, Northwest Program Director at Earthworks.

Following the 45-day objection window, the Forest Service will evaluate submitted objections and begin a formal resolution process between objectors and the Reviewing Officer. Following this process, the Forest Service will release a Final Record of Decision for the project, including any modifications made based on objection resolutions.

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Coalition members include Save The South Fork Salmon, Idaho Conservation League, Idaho Rivers United, Advocates For The West, American Rivers, and Earthworks.