



BITTERROOT WATER PARTNERSHIP

December 1, 2025

Statement from the Bitterroot Water Partnership

Delivered by Heather Barber, Executive Director

Honorable Chairman Huls, Commissioner Burrows, and Commissioner Chilcott:

I am here today on behalf of the Bitterroot Water Partnership (BWP) to ask for your help in securing a robust, transparent, and community-centered process regarding the proposed Sheep Creek mine — and to urge you to seriously consider opposing any mine that threatens to degrade the headwaters of the Bitterroot River.

For more than 30 years, BWP has worked exclusively for the waters, wildlife, farms, ranches, and people that make this Valley so extraordinary. We understand the needs of our growing community and support responsible, well-planned development. We know the Bitterroot has a bright economic future only IF we make decisions about our shared resources that are informed by local voices and grounded in long-term thinking.

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We are deeply concerned about the Rare Earth Element mine proposed at Sheep Creek, above the Painted Rocks Reservoir, at the very headwaters of the West Fork of the Bitterroot River.

The company behind the proposal, U.S. Critical Materials, has - to the best of my knowledge - done no meaningful engagement with our community.

I personally contacted a representative on two separate occasions in October and again in November, seeking information and a conversation, and received no response. Meanwhile, an executive recently stated that "... permits will come in the near term, enabling us to start bringing some volume production in 2026."

Despite the apparent lack of community consultation, the Federal Permitting Council (FPC) added this proposal to the FAST-41 list less than two weeks ago — and plans to establish a fast-track schedule by

tomorrow. That is not an adequate amount of time for the public to understand, evaluate, or respond to a project of this scale and risk.



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This action totally overlooked local input, and it signals that the communities most impacted may not receive the meaningful involvement they deserve in future decisions. The people of Ravalli County deserve better.

At a minimum, we respectfully ask that the Commission urge our federal representatives to delay the FPC in scheduling the fast-track and guarantee meaningful public participation.

And given what's at stake, we also ask you to seriously consider total opposition to any mining proposal that threatens the headwaters of the Bitterroot River.

Our Valley is already facing mounting pressures: warming waters, disappearing streamside habitat, sediment washing in from roads, and declining resilience for fish and wildlife. At the same time, more users are drawing from a river with diminishing availability and reliability. That means less groundwater recharge, more dry reaches, and heightened strain on agriculture.

All of this is intensified by a changing climate: hotter summers, earlier runoff, and reduced snowpack. These forces stack on top of one another, putting both our waters and our economy at risk.

The Water Partnership exists to address these challenges. Our mission is to protect and restore the waters that sustain our communities and our water-dependent economy. We engage landowners, support agriculture, and build local stewardship so future generations inherit something better — not something worse.

The proposed Sheep Creek mine puts the entire Bitterroot River system in jeopardy. Disturbing the headwaters threatens the quality and availability of the water that everything else relies on — our fisheries, our wildlife, our drinking water, our recreation economy, and the livelihoods tied to a healthy river.

We know this because we work for this river every single day. We see where it is strong and where it is vulnerable.

The proposed mine claim is located 13 miles upstream of Painted Rocks reservoir, and some of the high value deposits lie just 200 yards from the river.

The pollution that could occur here would have an outsized impact on a world-class wild trout fishery — a cultural, ecological, and economic treasure that drives tourism, recreation, and property values. The Bitterroot is the 7th most fished River in the state (FWP), representing the outstanding quality of our River and fish



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populations. Parts of the River have 1,000 fish per mile, and countless species like osprey, elk, moose, and more depend on these fish or the clean water they inhabit.

In 2023 tourists spent \$7.5 million dollars on guiding services in the Bitterroot Valley (ITRR).

This fishery, and a strong, growing tourism economy brings in \$67 million to our Valley each year.

However, sediment is already threatening the West Fork. The river is currently impaired by erosion, with existing roads contributing more than 3,000 tons of sediment every year. DEQ and the Bitterroot Watershed Restoration Plan call for a 60% reduction in sediment from surrounding roads just to meet basic water-quality needs.

A mine would push the river in the opposite direction. New road construction and heavy truck traffic in Sheep Creek would add even more sediment to an already overburdened system—further degrading spawning habitat, smothering fragile eggs, and reducing the aquatic insects that fish, birds, and wildlife depend on.

Plus, Rare-earth mining requires significant volumes of water. That water would come directly from the snowmelt and runoff we already depend on — water that is increasingly scarce and cannot be replaced. And even with promised cleanup or reclamation, history shows that once water systems in headwater basins are contaminated or overdrawn, the damage is often irreversible. There is no proven example of rare-earth mining done without long-term harm.

USCM has not shared complete, adequate, or final details about what their exploration, extraction or processing methods might entail. Until we learn more, we cannot calculate how much water they will use,

- Based on other examples of REE mines, we suspect a high potential for this mine to use and pollute massive amounts of water as 1) Rare earth mining tends to use more water than other types of mining due to the complex separation process, and 2) Depending on the methods used, REE mining can use anywhere from 200 to 1,500 cubic meters of water per ton of rare earth oxides produced

The Painted Rocks Reservoir, downstream from the proposed mine site — stores more than 10 billion gallons of water and stands as one of our valley's — and the state of Montana's — greatest shared-resource success stories. Jointly managed by FWP and the Painted Rocks Water Users Association, this reservoir keeps the



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Bitterroot running during low flow periods — including summer flows at Bell Crossing, which ran dry before this shared agreement was put in place. Nearly half of that stored water is dedicated to maintaining healthy in-stream flows for the fishery, and almost a third supports irrigated agriculture. This is exactly the kind of local collaboration we should be celebrating and strengthening — not putting at risk

Not to mention the Bitterroot is a closed basin for groundwater appropriations. We are already at our limit. Every drop of clean water matters.

The Bitterroot River supports 1,400 farms and ranches that generate \$33 million annually. With the money and jobs its supports, the Bitterroot River is a resource the people of Ravalli County literally cannot afford to lose.

We recognize that rare-earth minerals play a role in national security, clean energy, and technology. But the speculative minerals that may — or may not — be extracted from Sheep Creek are not worth risking the Bitterroot.

With that, The Partnership asks that you formally adopt — and advance to our federal representatives — the following directives:

- Suspend any fast-track or accelerated timeline until meaningful, accessible, and comprehensive public participation is assured.
- Require a full, rigorous environmental review under both federal and state law — not a cursory permit, shortcut, or categorical exclusion.
- Insist that the Bitterroot not be treated as a pilot site. This project should only ever be considered as a last-resort option, not an experimental testing ground.
- Oppose any mining activity that threatens the Bitterroot headwaters, recognizing that harm to our source waters jeopardizes the entire river system, our communities, local agriculture, and the economies that depend on it.

We cannot afford to be a test site. A rare-earth mine at Sheep Creek — with unproven technologies, unanswered questions, and no successful track record elsewhere — simply does not belong here.

This is not about being anti-mine or anti-development. This is about being FOR the river, and safeguarding its future for all who depend on it. This is about helping our community understand the true value of our waters — and reminding them of their right, and responsibility, to steward them for the future. We're the only ones who can.



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Because at the end of the day, Sheep Creek, the West Fork, and the Bitterroot Valley are more than spots on a map — they're our home.

We're lucky to live, work, and play here. And people from around the world visit to see something that is increasingly rare: a vibrant valley sustained by a healthy river running through its heart.

There's an old saying: "Never take a bet if you don't know how to win it."

U.S. Critical Materials is asking us to gamble with the Bitterroot River and everything it supports.

That is a bet we cannot take — because this is a resource we cannot afford to lose.

Thank you.