

Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce Opposition Letter (August 26, 2026)

Dear District Ranger Pliley,

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce is opposed to the proposed Sheep Creek Mine project and its proposed location in the headwaters of the Bitterroot River.

The health of the Bitterroot River and its headwaters is fundamental to the Bitterroot Valley's economy, quality of life, agriculture, recreation, tourism, and future. The West Fork provides pristine trout habitat for one of Montana's most-fished rivers, supports approximately 1,400 family farms and ranches, and supplies billions of gallons of water through Painted Rocks Reservoir for irrigation critical to local agriculture. It also contributes to a sustainable recreation economy valued at approximately \$80 million and supports a community culture deeply connected to wildlife, agriculture, recreation, and our natural resources.

Because so much depends on the health of this watershed, the potential impacts of US Critical Materials' proposed rare earth exploration and mine development in the headwaters of the West Fork are a serious concern. The Chamber also has significant apprehension regarding the lack of transparency and meaningful communication from US Critical Materials with our community throughout this process. A project with the potential to affect such an important natural resource and so many sectors of our local economy requires open communication, clear information, and a genuine opportunity for the community to understand and evaluate what is being proposed.

At this time, there are simply too many unanswered questions about the project and its potential long-term consequences. We are deeply concerned not only about the impacts we can identify today, but also about the unknown and potentially negative impacts that could emerge as exploration and development move forward. The possibility of unforeseen effects on water quality, the watershed, wildlife, agriculture, infrastructure, recreation, and our local economy reinforces the need for a thorough and independent environmental review before any decision is made.

The Chamber has taken the time to listen to our members, review information about the proposed project, and better understand its potential impacts on our community. Through this process, it has become clear that a majority of our members oppose the development of the Sheep Creek Mine in the headwaters of the Bitterroot River. We also recognize that opposition is widespread throughout the broader Bitterroot Valley community.

The Chamber supports responsible economic development and recognizes the importance of a strong and diverse local economy. However, economic development must be balanced with the long-term health, safety, and sustainability of our community and natural resources.

Responsible development also requires transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement with the people and communities most likely to be affected.

In this case, we believe the potential risks to the Bitterroot River watershed, water quality, agriculture, infrastructure, recreation, wildlife, and the economic vitality of the valley outweigh the potential economic benefits of the proposed project. Given the lack of transparency and communication to date, combined with the significant unknowns surrounding the potential impacts of this project, our concerns are only heightened.

For these reasons, the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce opposes the Sheep Creek Mine project and its proposed location in the headwaters of the Bitterroot River.

We believe the potential impacts must be fully understood before any decision is made. We urge the U.S. Forest Service to complete a comprehensive Environmental Assessment, at a minimum, before deciding whether exploration for the Sheep Creek Mine should be allowed to proceed. The current proposal does not, in our view, sufficiently address the potential risks to water quality, our community, infrastructure, wildlife, and threatened and endangered species. An Environmental Assessment is essential to provide a more thorough evaluation of both the known risks and the potential unknown consequences of allowing exploration to move forward. An Environmental Impact Statement is more appropriate for the scale of the project.

Protecting the Bitterroot River and its headwaters is not simply an environmental issue—it is an economic and community issue. The future of agriculture, recreation, tourism, businesses, and the quality of life we value in the Bitterroot Valley depends on a healthy and protected watershed.

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce respectfully urges the Forest Service to take the necessary steps to fully evaluate the known and potential impacts of this project, including those that may not yet be fully understood, before allowing exploration to proceed.

Sincerely,

Jodi Mitchell

Executive Director

Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce

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