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Mining ban secured for 20 years

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Two Southwest Oregon watersheds known for their wild salmon and steelhead, clean waters, natural and recreational resources, just received 20 years of protection from new hard rock mining projects.

The 20-year mining ban was secured by Senators Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Congressmen Peter DeFazio (D-OR) and Jared Huffman (D-CA) and will include the watershed of the National Wild and Scenic North Fork Smith River in Oregon, the watershed of Rough and Ready Creek (an eligible Wild and Scenic River and tributary to the National Wild and Scenic Illinois and Rogue rivers), as well as 17 miles of the National Wild and Scenic Chetco River.

The headwaters of Hunter Creek and the Pistol River, which that flow directly into the Pacific Ocean along the Wild Rivers Coast of Southern Oregon and Northern California, will also be protected.

“The 20-year ban on new mining claims is an important step in the right direction,” said Grant Werschkull, executive director of the Smith River Alliance, who gave a presentation to the Crescent City Council on Monday about the need for mineral withdrawals. “It is an amazing team effort on behalf of protecting our drinking water and the Smith River.”

In a written statement to the Triplicate on Friday, Werschkull lauded Huffman, DeFazio, Wyden and Merkley for their work. He also credited local agencies, tribes and “thousands of community members” who supported the temporary mining ban.

“We look forward to working with these partners to enact the Southwest Oregon Watershed and Salmon Protection Act, which will permanently protect the headwaters of the Smith and other spectacular rivers in our

bioregion from strip mining,” Werschkull said.

Huffman echoed Werschkull’s sentiments about the work Del Norte County residents and tribes have done in support of the mining ban.

“The people of Del Norte County, the Elk Valley and Tolowa Dee-ni’ tribes, and thousands of other Californians and Oregonians who cherish the Smith River have united in working to secure two decades of protection for this spectacular landscape and its wildlife for future generations,” he said. “I applaud the Obama Administration for taking this action today and thank my colleagues for their hard work and support.”

Residents in Southwest Oregon have also expressed support for a mineral withdrawal, as was expressed by many at a public hearing in Brookings Nov. 15, 2016. Many feared strip mining would contaminate drinking water, kill salmon and hamper natural tourism for years to come.

“This is an incredible victory for Southwest Oregon,” said DeFazio. “This mining ban will support the area’s recreation economy, safeguard safe drinking water sources for thousands of families in the area, and stop the threats of foreign-owned nickel mining companies who want to strip-mine this beautiful area. I’m proud to have helped to protect this unique land, and I thank my colleagues for their help in accomplishing this important goal.”

Senator Merkley called the rivers a public treasure, saying residents owe it to future generations to protect them.

“Mining would have posed an unacceptable threat to the region’s clean water and to the fishing and recreation economy that many rely on. These lands and waters belong to all of us, and today’s news is a huge victory in the fight to ensure that our beloved citizen-owned resources are passed down to future generations in the same condition we received them,” Merkely said.