

Agencies withdraw land to protect it from new mining

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The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have followed through on a threat to withdraw more than 100,000 acres of federal land from mineral development for 20 years to protect it against strip mining.

The withdrawal, initially proposed almost a year ago but formally announced Thursday, sets aside lands near and in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, covering the upper drainages of the Chetco, Smith and Illinois rivers where mining companies have explored for nickel. All are important salmon- and steelhead-bearing rivers.

Most of the withdrawal is U.S. National Forest Service land, with a small amount of BLM land, according to a release from both agencies.

The withdrawal was supported by a letter from the city of Cave Junction in November.

The withdrawal also follows congressional legislation proposed last year by Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Oregon, and Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats, to protect the area's pristine nature.

"This has been an amazing effort of communities in southwest Oregon and northwest California coming together to protect the clean, clear, drinking water and exceptional Wild and Scenic rivers and creeks that flow from these National Forest and BLM lands," said Barbara Ullian of Grants Pass, a longtime advocate of protecting the wild area, in a statement.

The legislation targeted the Red Flat Nickel Corp.'s proposal to strip-mine more than 3,000 acres, primarily for nickel, in the Baldface Creek drainage about 12 miles west of O'Brien just outside the Kalmiopsis Wilderness.

The company also has claims in other drainages.

According to the release from the agencies:

"This withdrawal does not prohibit or restrict any other authorized uses on these lands. The withdrawal protects these watersheds from possible adverse effects of mineral development.

"Also, while this action prohibits the location of new mining claims, it does not prohibit ongoing or future mining exploration or extraction operations on valid pre-existing mining claims."

Baldface Creek drains into the North Fork Smith River, prized by rafters and an important spawning tributary for salmon and steelhead.

At public meetings in Grants Pass and Cave Junction in 2015, sentiment was heavier toward protecting the watersheds, but others from the mining community were dismayed over shutting down land to extraction of natural resources.

Nickel is an alloy metal that among other things is used in the production of stainless steel.

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