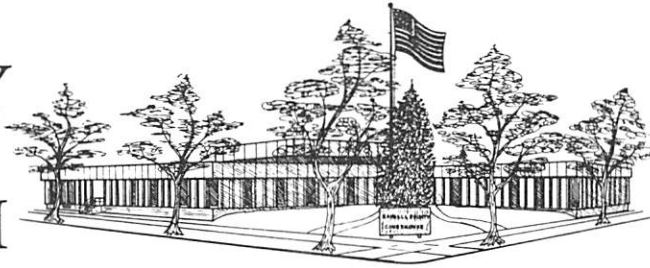


COUNTY OF RAVALLI



Ravalli County Board of Commissioners
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(406) 375-6500

December 2, 2025

The Honorable Ryan K. Zinke
512 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Zinke,

We are writing to express our strong opposition to adding the proposed **Sheep Creek Mine** in Ravalli County, located in the headwaters of the Bitterroot River to the “FAST-41” program. We absolutely believe that the review process should include input from local government and the citizens/public. We urge you to use your influence and your role on the House Committee on Appropriations to support a thorough environmental review and to resist moves that could greenlight this project without full consideration of its risks.

We held a public meeting on December 1, 2025 attended by approximately 700 citizens. We received NO public testimony in support of including the proposed mine in the FAST41 program. If the mine is to be considered, it **MUST** be reviewed under the highest environmental standards.

Our concerns about the Sheep Creek Mine are several-fold:

1. **Water Quality and Supply Risks**

- The proposed mine is near the headwaters of the Bitterroot River, a source of critical water for agriculture, livestock, and the broader Bitterroot Valley community.
- Exploration and future mining could lead to contamination from heavy metals or other toxins, threatening both surface and groundwater. Conservation groups have called for a full environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) precisely because of these risks.
- According to ecologists, rare-earth mining is very water-intensive, and local water resources may not be adequate to support such operations without harming existing uses. The Bitterroot Valley is in a closed basin for appropriation of new water rights.

2. **Ecological and Wildlife Impacts**

- The area supports critical habitat for several species of concern, including Westslope Cutthroat Trout (the Westfork is a stronghold for native Westslope Cutthroat Trout) and **bull trout**, which is listed under the Endangered Species Act.

- Other species — such as **grizzly bears, wolverines, and Canada lynx** — also roam in or near the proposed mine area, and the project would fragment wildlife corridors. Road construction, drill pads, and other infrastructure could degrade these habitats permanently.
- 3. **Transparency and Public Participation**
 - Conservation organizations have raised concerns that U.S. Critical Materials, the company behind the proposal, has not been fully transparent.
 - To date, there has been no effort by the U.S. Critical Materials to coordinate with the Commission or the community to ensure public health and safety impacts from mining exploration and operations are identified and mitigated.
 - There are serious questions about whether public participation will be meaningful in the permitting process. Local residents deserve a voice before any irreversible decisions are made.
- 4. **Long-Term Economic and Cultural Costs**
 - The Bitterroot Valley's economy is strongly tied to its natural landscape — from agriculture to recreation (fishing, tourism) — and any damage to water quality or wildlife could impose long-term costs on local businesses and livelihoods. There is also a moral and cultural question: do we want to risk our clean water and heritage for a potentially disruptive industrial operation that may or may not deliver commensurate local benefit?
- 5. **Precedent and Federal Responsibility**
 - Because the proposed mine is on U.S. Forest Service land, federal agencies have a duty to apply rigorous environmental oversight. As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, you have significant power to influence funding and policy tied to land management and environmental protections. We ask that you advocate for a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) if the Forest Service considers approving the mine.
- 6. **Local Impacts**
 - The proposed mine will create impacts to the majority of locally provided services including, but limited to:
 - 1. Law Enforcement
 - 2. Roads & Bridges
 - 3. Education
 - 4. Medical
 - 5. Search & Rescue
 - 6. Volunteer Fire Department
 - 7. Wildland Fire
 - 8. Air quality

What we respectfully request from you:

- Publicly urge the Forest Service to require a **full EIS** rather than allowing shortcuts or categorical exclusions.
 - Encourage your colleagues in Congress to support strong environmental protections for the Bitterroot watershed and to reject any weakening of laws that safeguard water, wildlife, and public lands.
 - Hold U.S. Critical Materials accountable: insist that they engage transparently with local government, communities, conservation groups, and federal agencies.
 - Monitor developments closely and communicate with your constituents about the status of this proposal and any actions you take on our behalf.
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We truly appreciate your service to Montana and your commitment to public lands. This issue is not just about mining — it is about protecting our water, wildlife, infrastructure and way of life in the Bitterroot Valley for future generations. We hope you will stand with your constituents and advocate for the strongest possible environmental review and safeguards.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Dan Huls, Chairman



Greg Chilcott, Member



Jeff Burrows, Member