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Legislation to withdraw proposed mining area introduced

By DEE CAMP
The Chronicle

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The U.S. Forest Service is supporting a bill before Congress that would remove more than 340,000 acres in the upper Methow Valley from the possibility of mining.

Under the bill, the 340,079-acre area near Mazama known as the Methow Headwaters would be withdrawn from all forms of:

- Entry, appropriation or disposal under the public land laws.
- Location, entry and patent under the mining laws.
- Disposition under the mineral leasing and geothermal leasing laws.

The bill was introduced in May by U.S. Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell,

both D-Wash. On Sept. 22, during a hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Deputy Chief of the U.S. Forest Service Leslie Weldon testified that the Department of Agriculture supports the bill, S. 2991.

A Canadian company, Blue River Resources Ltd. of Vancouver, B.C., proposed drilling up to 15 holes on Flagg Mountain, within the proposed withdrawal zone, to see if there are minerals worth extracting.

The company wanted to look for copper.

The Forest Service also is pursuing an administrative mineral withdrawal in aid of the proposed legislation, said Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest spokeswoman Holly Krake.

The process would involve

working with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to receive a segregation notice, plus completion of an environmental analysis by the Forest Service "with normal opportunities for public comment and engagement," Krake said.

Methow Headwaters Campaign is seeking to stop any plans for a copper mine on the mountain.

The group, on its website, called the federal General Mining Law of 1872 antiquated and said it allows "virtually free access to minerals on nearly all federal lands."

In an attempt to counter the proposal for Flagg Mountain and any future proposals, the Methow Headwaters Campaign lobbied for the "mineral withdrawal

proposal.

The proposed mineral withdrawal area surrounds Mazama and is bordered on the north by the Pasayten Wilderness, on the west largely by the North Cascades National Scenic Highway corridor and partly on the south by the Lake Chelan-Sawtooth Wilderness Area.

"The Methow Valley — especially farther west near Hart's Pass — has a long history of mining, and Flagg Mountain has been explored several times historically," the last time in the 1970s, the group said. "Exploratory drilling is the first step to developing a large-scale, likely open-pit mine in the upper Methow."

Late last week, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said he supports withdrawing the land from the

possibility of mining.

He said mineral withdrawal "is the best path toward mitigating any impacts to the ecological, cultural and economic significance of the Methow Valley to the surrounding communities."

While the Forest Service support of mineral withdrawal "is wonderful news that couldn't have happened without immense community support and the continued leadership of Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, we still have a lot of hard work to do to get the U.S. Forest Service to follow through with their commitment and take action before the end of this administration," according to the group's Oct. 13 blog entry.

The group asked its supporters to write to Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell.

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