



Forest Service News Release

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Notice of Intent to Conduct Mineral Exploration

Hamilton, MT, May 2, 2024 —The Bitterroot National has received a Notice of Intent (NOI) to conduct mineral exploration from U.S. Critical Materials within their registered lode claims in the Sheep Creek location on the West Fork Ranger District for the 2024 field season.

The historic Sheep Creek Columbite Deposit Mine Site is located in the southwestern corner of Montana in Ravalli County, in the headwaters of the West Fork of the Bitterroot River. The area is approximately 38 miles south of Darby. Deposits were discovered in the area in 1953 and have been studied and sampled since the early 1960s.

The NOI was accepted for the 2024 operating season which determined that a plan of operations is not required at this time.

Submission of a NOI for a proposed mining operation is required in order to provide the Forest Service District Ranger with sufficient information to determine if the level of proposed activity will require a plan of operations.

If the Forest Service authorized officer determines NOI operations will likely cause or are causing significant resource disturbances, the operator must submit a proposed plan of operations for approval. Operations cannot continue until a plan of operations is approved. Submission of a plan of operations then triggers the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable requirements.

The NOI recently submitted by U.S. Critical Materials is a continuation of work that was proposed in their previous NOIs from 2022 and 2023. A copy of the 2024 NOI is posted on the Sheep Creek project website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/bitterroot/?project=65203>.

Proposed exploration activities include continued sampling using hand tools, soil and stream sediment sampling, rock chip sampling, mapping and sampling of adits, ground geophysical surveys, and helicopter or drone-supported geophysical surveys. Close out for the 2024 season is expected to be on or before October 26, 2024.

By law, processing locatable minerals plans is nondiscretionary for the Forest Service. Miners have possessory rights associated with mining claims which authorizes the miner the right to use the surface for mining purposes including use and occupancy necessary for processing. All miners are subject to U.S. Forest Service Mining Regulations 36 CFR 228 Subpart A including requirements to submit a plan of operations and post a reclamation bond.

To date, the Bitterroot National Forest has not received a plan of operations which would detail further exploration activities which would be likely to cause significant disturbance.

For more information, contact Dan Pliley, West Fork District Ranger at (406) 821-3269. Stay in touch with us through www.facebook.com/DiscoverBitterrootNF.

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