



PRESS RELEASE

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Tommy Hough (on behalf of this coalition)

WaterWatch of Oregon

(206) 291-4145

tommy@waterwatch.org

<https://waterwatch.org>

Residents and Environmental Organizations Unite Against Proposed Deep Pit Mining in Josephine County

A coalition of conservation and community groups fighting to protect Grave Creek from a mining operation in Sunny Valley sent a letter to Governor Kotek warning the proposed open-pit gravel mine along a tributary of the Rogue River threatens salmon and steelhead.

Sunny Valley, Oregon — A coalition of four Oregon community and conservation organizations sent a letter to Governor Tina Kotek on Monday that warned a large-scale aggregate gravel mine proposal along Grave Creek, a tributary of the Wild and Scenic Rogue River, poses a threat to domestic water wells and wild salmon and steelhead populations, including endangered coho salmon.

The proposal by Sunny Valley Sand and Gravel, Inc., led by former Josephine County Commissioner Andreas Blech, is on a 210-acre property in the scenic rural community of Sunny Valley, which sits along Grave Creek. The area around Grave Creek serves as a gateway to the Wild Rogue Wilderness, and the Grave Creek boat ramp is the most common starting point for rafting and kayaking the 40-mile “wild” segment of the lower Rogue River. The proposed mining project would involve excavating numerous pits down to bedrock, reaching depths of approximately 80 to 90 feet within 50 feet of Grave Creek.

In their letter, the coalition warned Governor Kotek that mining could reduce a considerable volume of water from Grave Creek, which is already facing severe levels of over-appropriation. The mining proposal also involves “dewatering” the deep mine pits as groundwater fills them in, which is likely to negatively affect flows on Grave Creek.

“The proposed mining project would require substantial water in a remote, rural valley where the stream often runs dry and where the instream needs of fish and wildlife are already compromised by

low flows,” said Tory White, a staff attorney at WaterWatch of Oregon. “The project has also failed to demonstrate a viable means of securing the volume of water its backers claim it needs. These concerns are compounded by a history of illegal mining and unlawful water use at the site. Given these constraints, approving such a water-intensive operation would be imprudent.”

Along with the significant threat to the Rogue’s wild salmon and steelhead, the detrimental effects of mining so close to the banks of Grave Creek could also aggravate the strained water quality and flow of the creek, particularly during summer months, which could have far-reaching ecological impacts, especially this year given the severe snowpack drought in the state’s high country.

“Given the remote, poor quality gravel resource along Grave Creek and the speculative demand, the environmental risks of the mining are simply not justified,” said Steve Rouse, president of Rogue Advocates.

The coalition is also alarmed about the potential risks to domestic drinking water wells in the area. Local wells could dry up as a result of the mining, or become contaminated in a manner similar to the ongoing situation in Crook County, where wells are under scrutiny for dangerous levels of manganese and aluminum allegedly linked to a nearby Knife River aggregate operation. Senator Jeff Merkley has been leading the effort to uncover the cause of contaminations there.

“It’s crucial to our mission to do what we can to protect the livability of Sunny Valley,” said Debra Lawwill, president of Friends of Country Living. “Without access to clean water, this community’s survival will be threatened.”

In addition to its correspondence to Governor Kotek, the coalition fighting to protect Grave Creek has also engaged with state and local agencies to more thoroughly assess the mining proposal’s environmental risks, as well as impacts on area wildlife and communities that depend on the health of this vital Rogue River tributary.

“Tributaries like Grave Creek are the lifeblood of the Rogue,” said Frances Oyung, Rogue Riverkeeper program manager at the Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center. “They are the source of cold, unpolluted water and support spawning and rearing habitat for several native fish species. By negatively impacting the Rogue’s tributaries, one harms the larger waterway as well as the tributary watershed itself.”

(pull quote sheet follows)

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For over 40 years, WaterWatch of Oregon has been committed to a single, clear mission: To protect and restore flows in Oregon rivers and waterways to sustain native fish, wildlife, and the people of Oregon who depend on healthy rivers. WaterWatch of Oregon was the first organization in the west to seek structural reform of antiquated water laws to protect and restore our rivers, and facilitated passage of Oregon’s landmark Instream Water Rights Act in 1987.

QUOTE SHEET FOR PRESS

Tory White

Staff Attorney at WaterWatch of Oregon

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