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LAWSUIT CHALLENGES TRUMP ADMINISTRATION REVIEW OF MASSIVE ARIZONA COPPER MINE THAT WOULD DESTROY SACRED OAK FLAT

PHOENIX— Tribal and conservation groups sued the U.S. Forest Service today to stop a land trade that would hand over thousands of acres in the Tonto National Forest in central Arizona to a London-based mining company. The Oak Flat area, considered sacred by Apache and other Native people, would be destroyed by multinational mining company Rio Tinto for a massive copper mine.

“Without a doubt, the proposed mine presents a huge threat to water quality and water supplies for our region, since the mine would create a crater more than a mile wide and 1,000 feet deep, deplete billions of gallons of water, and destroy the environment and ancestral lands that are sacred to tribes in Arizona,” said Shan Lewis, vice chairman of the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe and president of the Inter Tribal Association of Arizona. For our 21 Member Tribes, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a magnifying glass on the fundamental need to protect and preserve healthy water supplies in Arizona.”

Today’s lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Phoenix, says the Trump administration violated federal law by failing to properly analyze and mitigate the proposed mine’s potential damage to waters, national forest land and wildlife. It also failed to apply the correct laws and regulations, including ignoring public input provisions, to infrastructure needed for the mine.

“Given the overwhelming pressure applied to the Forest Service from the highest levels of the Trump administration, it is no wonder that the agency’s analysis is fatally flawed,” said Roger Featherstone, director of the Arizona Mining Reform Coalition. “We are asking the court to throw out the final environmental analysis and restore the process that should have been followed to protect Oak Flat and thousands of additional acres of precious land from Resolution Copper’s failed experiment.”

“Trading away Oak Flat to an international mining company is simply wrong,” said Sandy Bahr, director of Sierra Club's Grand Canyon Chapter. “Wrong because Oak Flat is sacred land to the western Apaches and many other Native people. And wrong because the proposed mine would make a huge crater out of Oak Flat and dump more than a billion tons of toxic mining waste into a huge tailings dump. We object to the trade, the proposed mine, and the environmental analysis that fails to consider the public interest and the serious damage of this proposed mine.”

The Trump administration fast-tracked the Jan. 15 publication of a final [environmental analysis](#), which triggers the land exchange with Rio Tinto so it can build the Resolution Copper mine at [Oak Flat](#).

“Trying to force this decision before leaving office, the Trump administration put the interests of multinational mining corporations above those of Indigenous and local communities in Arizona,” said Pete Dronkers, southwest circuit rider with Earthworks. “The former administration’s rushed and flawed review unlawfully ignores the concerns expressed by the area’s tribes and communities. We join these mining-impacted communities to ask the court to put a stop to this injustice.”

Oak Flat has been used for centuries by Apache and other Native people for ceremony, sustenance and habitation, and ceremonies are still conducted there. Several tribes consider it sacred, including the nearby San Carlos Apache Tribe, which filed suit Jan. 15 to challenge the land exchange. Oak Flat is also a popular campground and recreation area, with stunning scenery and world-renowned rock climbing. It and the surrounding lands are important habitat for a diverse array of wildlife, including migratory and endangered birds as well as endangered plants and fish.

“Oak Flat is a sacred place to our friends in the Native American community, and climbers have enjoyed this beautiful landscape for generations,” said Chris Winter, executive director of Access Fund. “We could lose it all if Oak Flat is traded away to a foreign mining company. For everyone who cares about this special place, we have to stand up to keep public land in public hands.”

The mine would eventually cause the surface above it to collapse into a crater more than a mile wide and 1,000 feet deep, which would completely decimate the area. The 1.4 billion tons of toxic waste the mine would produce would be dumped on thousands of acres of nearby wildlands, turning a vibrant landscape into an industrial wasteland and threatening to contaminate groundwater and surface water in the area. The mine would use a vast amount of groundwater annually, equal to the amount used by the entire city of Tempe, Arizona.

“The most corrupt president in U.S. history sold out Oak Flat, along with the people who hold it sacred, on his way out the door,” said Randy Serraglio, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity. “We’re hopeful that a judge will agree this shoddy, fast-tracked review is illegal. We’ll use every means at our disposal to protect Oak Flat for all who cherish it.”

The plaintiffs in today’s lawsuit are the Arizona Mining Reform Coalition, the Inter Tribal Association of Arizona, Earthworks, the Center for Biological Diversity, Access Fund and the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club. The plaintiffs are represented by the Western Mining Action Project, a public-interest law firm specializing in mining issues in the West.

The Inter Tribal Association of Arizona, Inc. (“ITAA”), is an intertribal, nonprofit organization composed of 21 federally recognized Tribes with lands located primarily in Arizona, as well as in California, New Mexico, and Nevada. The ITAA’s Member Tribes have worked together since 1952 to provide a united voice for Tribes on

matters of common concern and have stood in united opposition to the Resolution Copper Mine and Land Exchange for over 15 years. The representatives of ITAA are the highest elected tribal officials from each of the Member Indian Tribes, including tribal chairpersons, presidents, and governors.

The Arizona Mining Reform Coalition is comprised of Arizona groups and individuals that work to ensure that responsible mining contributes to healthy communities, a healthy environment, and, when all costs are factored in, is a net benefit to Arizona. The Arizona Mining Reform Coalition expects the mining industry to clean up after itself, comply fully with the spirit of safeguards in place to protect Arizona, and to interact in a transparent and open manner with Arizona citizens.

The Sierra Club is one of the largest and most influential grassroots environmental organizations in the U.S., with more than 3.5 million members and supporters. In addition to protecting every person's right to get outdoors and access the healing power of nature, the Sierra Club works to promote clean energy, safeguard the health of our communities, protect wildlife, and preserve our remaining wild places through grassroots activism, public education, lobbying, and legal action. The Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club, representing 16,000 members, has a long history of public education and advocacy to protect Oak Flat and other lands affected by this proposed mine. Its members recreate in these areas and enjoy hiking, camping, backpacking, climbing, wildlife viewing, and more.

Earthworks is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting communities and the environment from the impacts of mineral development while seeking just, equitable, and sustainable solutions.

Access Fund is the national advocacy organization that keeps climbing areas open and conserves the climbing environment. Founded in 1991, Access Fund supports and represents millions of climbers nationwide in all forms of climbing: rock climbing, ice climbing, mountaineering, and bouldering. Six core programs support the mission on national and local levels: climbing policy and advocacy, stewardship and conservation, local support and mobilization, land acquisition and protection, risk management and landowner support, and education. For more information, visit www.accessfund.org.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.