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Hardshell exploratory drilling threatens endangered wildlife on Coronado National Forest

Conservation groups challenge project

TUCSON, Ariz.—A coalition of conservation groups has gone to court seeking a timeout on construction of the Hardshell Project on the Coronado National Forest in southern Arizona today. The groups are challenging the U.S. Forest Service for approving exploratory mineral drilling for a planned 3,000-acre mine without required studies of how it will impact endangered wildlife and the environment.

“The Forest Service appears to have pulled a fast one on this project by approving it without first assessing its environmental impact. There’s no way to expand industrial mining activities here without causing irreversible damage to wildlife,” said Craig Miller, Defenders of Wildlife’s Southwest representative. “When you take a broad view of all the industrial mining projects the Forest Service is allowing in this area, it’s alarming that it’s being done without considering impacts on our wildlife and wild places. It’s especially serious for endangered animals like the jaguar, whose survival depends on land managers ensuring that a few wild places like the Patagonia Mountains remain intact.”

The Hardshell Project site threatens habitat for endangered Mexican spotted owls, lesser long-nosed bats, and could cut off key migration corridors for ocelots and jaguars. Yet, the Forest Service approved the project after waiving the need for analyzing its environmental impact based upon groundless assumption that the drilling would have no significant environmental effects.

“The Coronado National Forest is located within the heart of the Sky Island region, one of the most ecologically diverse spots in the world,” said Jenny Neeley, conservation policy director for Sky Island Alliance. “This project will likely degrade important wildlife habitat and disrupt a critical movement corridor for the jaguar and ocelot, which are known to roam this area. The Forest Service is responsible for sustaining the unique biodiversity of this region, and as part of this responsibility it is required to take a hard look at the long-term impacts of this project before allowing it to move forward.”

The groups are asking the courts to put the project on hold until the Forest Service undertakes a thorough environmental review of its impacts.

“We want the Forest Service to give this proposed drilling project the serious consideration it is due,” said Wendy Russell with the Patagonia Area Resource Alliance. “A large part of our economy depends on tourism to these wild places. More important, the project is sited along Harshaw Creek, a major source of water for the town of Patagonia. We hope the court recognizes the importance of putting this project on hold until the Forest Service does the proper analysis.”

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Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With more than 1 million members and activists, Defenders of Wildlife is a leading advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard our wildlife heritage for generations to come. For more information, visit www.defenders.org

Sky Island Alliance is a grassroots non-profit organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of the rich natural heritage of native species and habitats in the Sky Island region of the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. For 20 years, SIA has worked with volunteers, scientists, landowners, public officials, and government agencies to establish protected areas, restore healthy landscapes, and promote public appreciation of the region's unique biological diversity.

The Patagonia Area Resource Alliance is an unincorporated association of volunteer community members dedicated to protecting and preserving the Patagonia, Arizona area. PARA is a watchdog organization that monitors the activities of industrial developers such as mining corporations, as well as government agencies, to make sure their actions have long-term, sustainable benefits to our public lands, our watershed, and our town. PARA is also committed to outreach and education within our community on the potential negative impacts hard rock mining could have on our surrounding ecosystems and to our growing eco-tourism based economy.

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