



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary  
Washington, D.C. 20250

October 12, 2016

The Honorable Maria Cantwell  
United States Senate  
311 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Cantwell:

Thank you for your letter of June 16, 2016, cosigned by Senator Patty Murray, to the Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and me, regarding your request to execute a mineral withdrawal in aid of the Methow Headwaters Protection Act of 2016 (S. 2991). I recognize the ecological and economic significance of the Methow Valley to the surrounding communities, and I am committed to effectively safeguarding these vital resources. I support S. 2991 and believe a 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.

Mineral exploration and extraction in the Methow Valley dates back to the late 1800s. The Flagg Mountain Exploratory project (Mazama Copper Exploration Project) referenced in your letter stems from intermittent mineral exploration that has been conducted near the town of Mazama since the 1960s. Historic exploration identified a prospective copper deposit and resulted in the filing of a number of mining claims. The current owner of this claim block, Blue River Resources, has applied for a permit to drill up to 15 exploratory holes near existing roads on some of their 52 mining claims which could aid in establishing a valuable minerals discovery at the present time.

The Forest Service anticipated completing the environmental analysis and making a decision on authorization for the exploration this summer. However, through the public engagement process and subsequent analysis, several new considerations have surfaced, including for example, that the area proposed for possible exploration and mining activity may be significant to area Tribes.

This reveals the need for continuation of a thorough and careful analysis to ensure that the region's natural resources and the concerns of the tribal community are fully understood and analyzed. The Methow region is one of several areas on National Forest System lands across the country for which the Forest Service is currently analyzing complex and often controversial potential mineral activities. In a time of budget constraints, the agency's overall capacity to conduct the analysis and public outreach is limited. At the same time, in response to legislation introduced by Senator Murray as well as public input, the agency is beginning to assemble the withdrawal application.

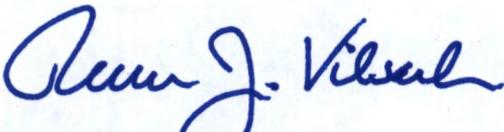
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Applications for withdrawals are complex and require preparation of several items including the description of the lands to be withdrawn, justification for withdrawal, and whether any suitable alternative sites are available for the proposed use, or for uses which the requested withdrawal action would displace. Withdrawal applications typically take a year or more to complete. Once completed and submitted, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will decide whether to accept or deny the application. If the BLM accepts the application, a Notice of Proposed Withdrawal is published in the Federal Register that will specify the extent to which the subject lands are segregated for a 2-year period pending further analysis and a final decision on the withdrawal by the Secretary of the Interior.

Segregation closes the land to mineral entry and appropriation under the U.S. mining laws, as amended, subject to valid existing rights for 2 years. If a properly located and maintained mining claim predates a mineral segregation and the claim contained a discovery of valuable minerals as of the date of segregation, and that discovery continues to the present time, the claim is deemed to have valid existing rights. In such a case, the right to develop the mineral deposit would be unaffected by the proposed mineral withdrawal.

Again, thank you for writing, and for your interest in the protection and management of your National Forests. A similar response is being sent to Senator Murray. If you have any further questions, please contact Todd Batta, Assistant Secretary, Office of Congressional Relations, at (202) 720-7095.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Thomas J. Vilsack". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Thomas" and last name "Vilsack" clearly legible.

Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary