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SUSTAINABILITY

Opposition to lithium mine grows among tribes, conservationists

BY: JENIFFER SOLIS - JUNE 11, 2021 6:00 AM



📷 Mule deer crossing Thacker Pass in Northern Nevada along the Oregon-Nevada border. Photo credit Max Wilbert, co-founder of Protect Thacker Pass.

A planned lithium mine on an ancient collapsed volcano is facing growing pushback from tribal nations, ranchers and conservationists.

In January, the Bureau of Land Management approved the Thacker Pass lithium mine five days before the end of Donald Trump's presidency. It was one of several projects fast-tracked in the last days of the Trump administration to advance energy and mining projects on public land, including a copper mine in Arizona that was [set to be built](#) on sacred Native American land.

Opponents of the Thacker Pass mine argue the environmental review for the mine was rushed, saying what is normally a multiyear process was completed in less than a year. Additionally, the coronavirus pandemic blunted participation during the mandatory public comment period.

Tribal leaders are now voicing opposition to the project and its speedy approval by BLM without engaging or consulting the region's various tribes and argue that construction on their ancestral land is "like disturbing Pearl Harbor or Arlington National Cemetery."

BLM declined to comment due to pending litigation brought by a coalition of conservation groups that argues the approval violated federal environmental law.

"We are committed to and doing everything in our power to prevent any damage from ground-disturbing activities by Lithium Nevada or the Bureau of Land Management, before our filed complaint has its day in court," said John Hadder, executive director of Great Basin Resource Watch, Wednesday after conservation groups successfully petitioned a court to delay any construction of the mine for at least until July 29.

Thacker Pass is the traditional homeland of several related Indigenous nations, including the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Reservation, the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe, Lovelock Paiute Tribe, Fallon Paiute Shoshone Tribe, Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe and the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony.

On June 3, the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony sent a letter to the BLM Winnemucca District Office asking the federal agency to halt the construction of the mine "until meaningful government-to-government consultation with all of the tribes that are connected to Thacker Pass has concluded."

"The BLM Winnemucca District Office must understand that Thacker Pass is a shared use area by a number of tribes," read the letter. "Just because regional tribes have been isolated and forced onto reservations relatively far away from Thacker Pass does not mean these regional tribes do not possess cultural connections to the Pass."

In the colony's traditional language Thacker Pass is referred to as "Peehee mu'huh" which translates to "rotten moon" in honor of the

colony's ancestors who were massacred in an area of the Pass shaped like a moon.

"To disturb this massacre site Peehee mu'huh would be like disturbing Pearl Harbor or Arlington National Cemetery," reads the letter. "Destroying these sites destroys our history. And, it makes us wonder if an underlying motivation for this mine is to destroy the historical evidence of the genocide perpetrated against our people."

The Thacker Pass [environmental review](#) identified over a thousand cultural resource sites that would be damaged by the mine's development, the vast majority vestiges of obsidian used to make arrowheads and other tools. The review also found that 52 historic properties eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places would be affected.

"Lithium Nevada is working hard to ensure impacts to historic artifacts are mitigated," said Tim Crowley, vice president of government affairs and community relations for Lithium Nevada, a subsidiary of Lithium America and the company behind the mine, in a statement.

Far Western Anthropological Research Group is currently seeking a BLM permit to conduct additional cultural work at Thacker Pass. The Fort McDermitt Tribe and Winnemucca Indian Colony are also being invited to participate, said Crowley.

In 2019, Lithium Nevada came to an agreement with the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone including employment screening of tribal members and workforce development training at Fort McDermitt and Winnemucca.

Lithium Nevada said constructive input from Fort McDermitt about the project was essential during the environmental review.

"The EIS is now approved, and we remain committed to an open dialogue with all neighbors," Crowley said.

In late March, however, the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone tribal council voted unanimously to cancel the previous agreement with Lithium Nevada based on a petition from tribal members and growing community opposition to the project.

"That was a success in that we got a lot of people to sign it and our tribe to accept the petition asking for that disengagement," said Daranda Hinkey, a member of the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone

Tribe who helped draft the petition.

The Fort McDermitt reservation, an isolated community of about 340 people, is about 50 miles from the project site. The Pass holds cultural significance to the tribe's oral history.

"It's going to harm our traditional plants, foods, and roots that we gather. That's also food for a lot of the animals we hunt during certain seasons," Hinkey said. "The biggest thing is the water. We are in a drought; how is that sustainable? What will be left for future generations?"

The lithium would be extracted with a technique using as much as 5,800 tons of sulfuric acid a day to extract the metal from clay and would create 354 million cubic yards of clay mining waste over four decades – enough to fill the Houston Astrodome about 220 times over.

Billions of gallons of groundwater would be used for the mine, amounting to about 3,230 gallons per minute, according to the environmental review. The mine may also lead to groundwater contamination of toxic chemicals and metals including arsenic, sulfate, and antimony due to waste rock produced by the mining process, according to the environmental review.

Enormous amounts of carbon emissions – up to 133,000 tons a year – would also be generated by the mine.

Valuable wildlife habitat would be damaged were the mine to move forward. The project would degrade nearly 5,000 acres of pronghorn antelope winter range, and 427 acres of summer range and sever two critical pronghorn movement corridors, according to the environmental review.

The greater sage-grouse, an imperiled ground-nesting bird, would lose thousands of acres of brood-rearing and winter habitat. Less than a mile from the future mine is also an active breeding ground for the bird, another three are within 3 miles of the project area.

Hinkey and other Northern Paiute women from the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone Tribe and Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe are planning to protest the mine June 12 in downtown Reno. Hinkey serves as secretary of the Atsa Koodakuh wyh Nuwu (People of Red Mountain), another group of native peoples opposing the proposed mine.

The protest will include a traditional prayer and speakers from the Fort McDermitt area whose ancestors' graves are in danger of being desecrated, according to the group.

"If the mine moves forward that would just make it easier for the next lithium mine to come in," Hinkey said. "It sets a precedent and not a good one."

Growing demand for electric cars and clean energy technology has led to mining companies looking to increase lithium production in Nevada, home to the only large-scale lithium mine in the U.S.

The Thacker Pass mine would produce about 800 tons of battery-grade lithium metal annually over the first four years of the mine's life, according to the environmental review.

The Biden administration has the authority to stop or pause projects, as it did with the proposed copper mine in Arizona. But projects like Thacker Pass that have already secured permits may be difficult to stop.

Lawmakers in the state also see lithium mining and clean-energy technology as a means of diversifying the economy. The mine would employ about 1,000 people during construction and nearly 300 people full-time positions once it's fully operational. The BLM estimated that the mine could generate \$17 million in tax revenue and \$34 million in additional economic activity in the state.

"Nevada is at the geographical center of energy transmission for the Western U.S. and has an opportunity to become to energy what Wall Street is to finance, or what Silicon Valley is to technology," said Gov. Steve Sisolak in his State of the State address in January.

"And, guess what, Nevada is home to the most accessible lithium reserves in North America."



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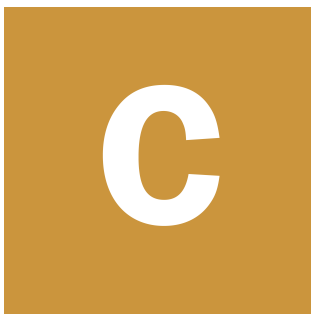
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