Rapid Creek — in Lakota it is called Mniluzahan (Mni for “water” and Luzuhan for “fast”) — is approximately 86 miles long and originates in the ecologically rich Black Hills. It winds east into Pactola Reservoir, a recreation area and drinking water source, flows through Rapid City, the second largest city in South Dakota, and then joins the Cheyenne River, a tributary of the Missouri River. The creek’s watershed includes rural and tribal communities, Ellsworth Air Force Base and Box Elder — collective populations of 89,408 — which rely on Rapid Creek water. Pennington County, the county that includes most of Rapid Creek, is home to Mount Rushmore, a U.S. National Monument, and tourism generates $787 million per year. Rapid Creek is also a world-class trout fishery, and outdoor recreation is a major economic driver in the central Black Hills.

**THE THREAT**

Currently, four companies are applying to explore for gold in the central Black Hills. At least two of the projects are in the Rapid Creek watershed — those proposed by Mineral Mountain Resources and F3 Gold. Mineral Mountain Resources has mining claims on over 7,500 acres and is drilling on private land near Pe’ Sla, a major cultural site of the Lakota people. Although the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty gave the Lakota and Dakota tribes ownership of the land, the site is so important that the tribes recently purchased a portion of Pe’ Sla in order to protect it. F3 Gold holds 2,485 mining claims and wants to explore immediately above the inlet to Pactola Reservoir. Its claims extend into the lake.

Gold mining has an unsavory history in the northern Black Hills. After the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty reserved the area to the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota peoples in perpetuity, non-indigenous people proceeded to enter the area to explore for gold. The Black Hills have been sacred to Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial. For over 150 years, the U.S. government has tried to get legal title to the Black Hills. The Lakota have rejected the offer of a settlement. In the meantime, billions of dollars of gold were mined from the northern Black Hills without compensation to the Great Sioux Nation. Mining operations have harmed the land, wildlife and water, and a former gold mine has been declared a Superfund site.
Large-scale gold mining must be stopped from moving south into the Rapid Creek watershed, where it would threaten Lakota homelands, treaty territory, and present-day reservation lands and rural and ranching communities. This threat is especially severe due to the geology of the eastern Black Hills. As Rapid Creek flows east from Pactola Reservoir into Rapid City, it crosses an area where large amounts of water drop out of the stream and into two underground aquifers. Rapid City’s water supply comes from Rapid Creek and from wells drilled into these two aquifers. Climate change and associated droughts will only exacerbate demands for clean water.

In the case of a mining spill, Rapid Creek would be polluted with cyanide, arsenic and other heavy metals, and the aquifers would be polluted soon after. The area’s major population center, tourism and a large Air Force base would be severely compromised, with major long-term consequences.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The U.S. Forest Service has announced that environmental assessments will be conducted for the Black Hills projects, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. The Forest Service must go beyond that and do more thorough environmental impact statements on the proposed projects potential impacts, including formal consultation with 16 tribal nations. Thousands of people over the last two years, through a variety of public outreach efforts, have opposed mining development in the Black Hills. The Forest Service must take landscape-level impacts into consideration with these collective proposals to explore for gold on public lands in the central Black Hills. If these mines cannot be implemented without environmental and cultural harm (none have been able to do so thus far), the projects must be denied.

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