

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 2, 2024

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland,

We are writing to request the Department of the Interior expeditiously initiate and complete a 20-year mineral withdrawal for federal public land in the Amargosa River watershed that is critical to the protection of the Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Death Valley National Park, and residents of Amargosa Valley in Nye County, Nevada. In order to protect local communities and economies, cultural resources important to regional tribes, and the region's incredible biodiversity, we request the Department immediately initiate a segregation of the approximately 276,000 acres of public lands, as identified by a recent third-party hydrological study, to further analyze the region for a long-term land withdrawal. Enclosed is the accompanying hydrological study and area map for your review.

Located in the most arid part of the United States, Ash Meadows NWR is a hot-spot for biodiversity. It is home to 26 endemic species that live only in the Refuge and no place else on Earth. There are 12 species that are listed as threatened or endangered under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act. Within the Refuge, the National Park Service manages Devils Hole, a detached unit of Death Valley National Park that is home for the endangered Devils Hole pupfish. In addition to the unique and diverse species that rely on the desert oasis, the Ash Meadows NWR is a critical stopover for migrating birds through the Pacific flyway.

The ecosystem at Ash Meadows NWR is entirely dependent on groundwater. Recent proposals for exploratory mineral drilling and extraction near the Refuge boundary pose an immediate threat to the integrity of this fragile ecosystem. The aforementioned hydrological analysis was commissioned to assess the potential effects of mining activity near and in the vicinity of the Refuge. Results from this study demonstrate a high likelihood of irreversible impacts to the springs at Ash Meadows, Death Valley, and species dependent on these habitats. Drilling for exploration or mining could puncture the highly pressurized underlying aquifer, resulting in artesian flow that could reduce spring flows and water levels at Devils Hole, and would have widespread catastrophic effects on this fragile landscape. Pit mining activities would require dewatering that would draw down groundwater levels, reducing spring flow in the Refuge and affecting the water supply for local communities.

In response to this threat, there is widespread support to enhance protections for this unique ecological system. The Timbisha Shoshone Tribal Council has appealed to our offices in support of an immediate withdrawal for public lands within the Amargosa Valley as Ash Meadows is an integral part of the larger landscape that supports tribal traditions.

In addition, our request is supported by the Nye County Board of Commissioners, the Nye County Water District, and both the town boards of Amargosa Valley and Beatty. Numerous conservation organizations and individual constituents have also raised the alarm about these critical threats.


Formally withdrawing these lands from new mining and exploration would preserve the crucial and culturally-significant water resources in and around Ash Meadows, Death Valley, and Amargosa Valley from additional


harm. Maintaining the integrity of this watershed is not only important for conserving the unique plants and animals that live in this special place, but it also helps protect the water source for the surrounding communities. Ash Meadows and Death Valley are ecotourism destinations, providing recreational and educational opportunities to visitors year-round and helping to support local economies, and it is imperative to protect these natural treasures and further safeguard this remarkable landscape from groundwater depletion.

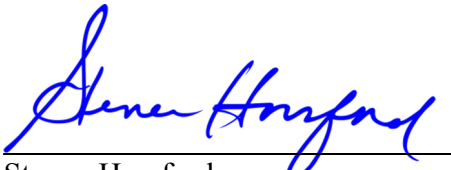
We strongly urge the Department of the Interior to direct the relevant agencies, including the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service, to cooperatively expedite an immediate segregation and commence a mineral withdrawal process for these sensitive and biodiverse lands.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,


Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator


Jacky Rosen
U.S. Senator


Steven Horsford
Member of Congress
Nevada's Fourth Congressional
District


Susie Lee
Member of Congress


Dina Titus
Member of Congress

cc:

Tracy Stone-Manning, Director, U.S. Bureau of Land Management

Charles Sams, Director, National Park Service

Martha Williams, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Cynthia Martinez, Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System

Matt Lee-Ashley, Chief of Staff at the White House Council on Environmental Quality