

EDITORIAL

A headwaters victory

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Oregonians got a rare bit of good environmental news from the federal government Thursday.

Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and Rep. Peter DeFazio announced that the U.S. Forest Service had notified them that more than 100,000 acres of public land in Southwestern Oregon will continue to be protected against strip mining.

The Obama administration, in its final days, had blocked plans by an overseas company to strip-mine more than 3,000 acres of land by banning new mining for 20 years on a total of 100,000 acres. The withdrawal included the area around the headwaters of the Smith and Illinois rivers and 17 miles of the Chetco River — all part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System — as well as the headwaters of the Pistol River and Hunter Creek, two prized salmon streams that flow into the Pacific Ocean.

The action — technically a withdrawal of mineral rights — came as Red Flat Nickel Corp., a Panama-based subsidiary of a British investment firm, was making plans to begin strip mining in the area, primarily for nickel.

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The idea behind the 20-year ban was that it would give Congress time to enact permanent protections for the area, Wyden said at the time.

Early last year, Red Flat Nickel and other mining interests, primarily from out of state, attempted to get the mining ban lifted. They had the support of Utah Republican Rep. Rob Bishop, who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee. Bishop said that “millions of acres of federal land were inappropriately withdrawn from mineral access due to false premises of environmental protectionism and the intentional misuse of statutory authority.” (Jefferson Public Radio reported that mining interests have been among Bishop’s top 10 campaign contributors).

Plans to mine this area — which is between Grants Pass and the coastal towns of Brookings and Gold Beach — united a broad coalition of environmentalists, businesses, educators, tribal and local government officials. They said that allowing mining, particularly strip mining, would have devastating environmental and economic effects, harm the tourism and fishing industries, threaten drinking water and fish runs, and forever change a rare, unspoiled area.

DeFazio, Merkley and Wyden went to bat for them and, on Tuesday, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue agreed that protections should remain in place. He said that although his department would continue to review requests to withdraw public lands from mining, this one was a done deal. It had been officially withdrawn by the Obama administration for a 20-year period. Unless Congress directs otherwise, Perdue said, he has no plans to revisit the issue.

This is good news for Oregon, which faced the prospect of a foreign company moving in, destroying an area of economic and environmental importance, pocketing its profits and then moving on. Perdue, and the members of Congress who fought this, deserve Oregonians’ thanks.

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