

ONE NATIVE GROUP'S FIGHT TO PROTECT SACRED LAND FROM DESTRUCTIVE LITHIUM MINING

First Nations Development Institute

Republished from First Nations Development Institute, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.firstnations.org/stories/one-native-groups-fight-to-protect-sacred-land-from-destructive-lithium-mining>.

The green-energy agenda coming out of Washington, D.C., is being touted as the panacea to climate change.

But at what cost to some Native American communities?

That's what People of Red Mountain is asking — a grassroots organization of traditional knowledge keepers and members of the Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Tribe fighting hard against a proposed lithium mine in Thacker Pass, Nevada, an area in Humboldt County estimated to contain the largest-known lithium deposits in the United States, according to mining sources.

This sacred land, better known as “Peehee Mu’huh” (Rotten Moon), is also home to 923 Native cultural sites — many of them burial sites — of which 56 are eligible for the National Register of Historical Places, says Gary McKinney, co-founder of People of Red Mountain and a member of the Duck Valley Shoshone-Paiute Tribe.

But if Lithium Nevada Corporation, a subsidiary of Canadian-owned Lithium Americas, has its way, it will operate a \$1.3 billion open-pit lithium mine on about 6,000 acres of that very land stewarded by the Paiute Shoshone people since time immemorial. The extracted mineral will be used to produce lithium-powered batteries for electric vehicles in line with the federal government's clean-energy agenda.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved the lithium mine on January 15, 2021, without attempting any good faith consultations with the tribe, states a People of Red Mountain spokesperson. “There was no consultation with the tribe that this mine was even in the works.” Most egregiously, BLM fast-tracked the environmental impact statement. This “flawed” study on how the mine would affect the water, air, land, wildlife, plants, food, and people in surrounding communities “took only one year when it should have taken five.”

The lithium mine has sparked much controversy within the tribe itself. Supporters of the mine argue that the project will provide many needed jobs for Native communities. “The Fort McDermitt tribe is not exactly on the same page as we are. Most of the Tribal Council has been very supportive of the mine and the potential boost to the economy,” says People of Red Mountain. “Our group, on the other hand, is composed of Natives and non-Natives opposed to the mining because we want to protect sacred land and water.”

People of Red Mountain say that the proposed mine has created a palpable rift within the tribe. “It has divided both the tribe and the community. It has caused a huge, huge division between everyone. People who are lifelong friends have had to choose sides.”

How the mine threatens the Paiute Shoshone people

While the mine is expected to be a profit bonanza for Lithium Nevada, it will come at a great environmental and spiritual cost to the Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Tribe, whose reservation border is only 15 miles from the proposed mining site.

The project data is staggering. The mining company estimates that per year it will produce 152,703 tons of carbon dioxide emissions, burn 680,000 tons of sulfur, and use nearly two billion gallons of water in a basin already suffering from severe drought.

People of Red Mountain also worry that the mine will leach uranium, antimony, sulfuric acid, aluminum, and arsenic, and leave radioactive waste in its wake. “Lithium Nevada wants to turn Thacker Pass into a toxic wasteland by contamination of water, air, irreparable damage to the land and culturally important animals, medicines, and first foods, ultimately guilty of cultural genocide to the Paiute and Shoshone people,” the organization tells First Nations.

McDermitt — a small town on the Nevada-Oregon border where some tribal members live, and just four miles from the reservation — cannot bear any additional contamination to its water supply, Chanda Callao, an organizer for People of Red Mountain, states. “Before and during COVID, the town couldn’t tap into its water because of the high arsenic levels.”

She says McDermitt continues to have problems with its water supply from the Cordero and McDermitt Mercury Mines, shut down in the 70s and 80s, respectively. A 2010 analysis by the Environmental Protection Agency revealed excessive levels of mercury and arsenic in the soil in numerous areas in McDermitt, as well as on the nearby reservation.

McKinney, one of the leading voices for People of Red Mountain, says that digging for lithium in Thacker Pass will also desecrate the “final resting place” of his ancestors. He reminds us that this sacred area is the site of two massacres of the Paiute people and now serves as a ceremonial ground.

The first massacre between Paiute and Pitt River Indians is documented only in oral history. A newspaper account and book recount the second attack by U.S. soldiers on 30 Paiute tribal members in 1865. Elders, women, and children were among the massacred.

Most concerning, the lives of Indigenous women are at stake. The mine will employ 1,250 workers — the majority of which will likely be non-Native men — who will live in “man camps.” Many mining sites in the U.S. are in close proximity to Indian reservations, and growing evidence — including a recent Canadian investigation — shows a link between the resource extraction

industry and the disturbing epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirits.

The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women reports that American Indian women face murder rates more than 10 times the national average. And the Urban Indian Health Institute cites murder as the third leading cause of death for Native women.

Help from First Nations

The biggest challenge facing People of Red Mountain is getting the word out to tribal members and affected communities about the planned mine. In McDermitt, only a few people knew about the project at first, says Callao. “We were all a little confused because it was so quiet. Nobody really knew anything. It was just all this small talk going around about a lithium mine.”

Not anymore. With a \$30,000 grant from First Nations, People of Red Mountain has crafted a multi-pronged communications plan to educate communities directly affected by the mine. The grant is part of the [Supporting Indigenous-Led Environmental Justice](#) initiative, a First Nations’ partnership with the **Broad Reach Fund** that supports “Native American-led efforts to combat abusive extractive industries that are impacting Native communities, resources, and land through direct funding support to tribal communities and organizations on the front lines.” People of Red Mountain’s mission is simple: “Our goal is to raise awareness of the proposed mine and to protect the land sacred to Indigenous peoples.” The organization is getting its message out there through billboards, yard signs, stickers, t-shirts, newsletters, and community awareness events.

The billboard campaign includes four billboards on display in Northern Nevada. Two read: “Life Over Lithium,” and the other two billboards declare, “Ecosystems Over Lithium.” All the billboards point readers to People of Red Mountain’s website for more detail about the Thacker Pass mine.

“These billboards have really opened people’s eyes. So many didn’t know anything about the lithium mining project because it was fast-tracked,” claims Callao. She says the billboards also serve as a good visual reminder to the Tribal Council, the surrounding communities, and others in favor of the mine of what should be the real priorities.

A four-color newsletter is in the works and will be distributed directly to mailbox holders in rural communities surrounding the mining area by the new year. “Many of these residents are elders and likely do not get on the Internet, so we thought a newsletter would be the best way to reach them,” Callao explains.

Lastly, the First Nations grant helped People of Red Mountain stage the second annual community awareness event on Sept. 11 commemorating the two Peehee Mu’huh massacres. “We had about 100 people attend. Many people spoke and we said many prayers. It was a very powerful event,” recalls Callao.

The fight continues

This past February, the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection issued air, water, and mining permits for the lithium mining project. But construction on the proposed mine has not yet begun due to pending litigation.

Several lawsuits have been filed against BLM and the U.S. Department of the Interior over the planned mine by neighboring tribes, environmental groups, mining watchdogs, and a generational rancher. At the court hearing on Jan. 5, 2023, they will make a formal request to rescind all project permits until another environmental impact study is conducted.

McKinney says the study was rushed and did not factor into it the declining population of an endangered snail. And while People of Red Mountain is not part of the lawsuit, McKinney says the organization is in full support of the plaintiffs.

“Those of you listening, we need to protect our cultural sites because they mean something to us,” he says passionately. “Our massacre sites, our burial sites, our cultural sites, our medicines, our roots, our water, our air. We need to protect them. We need to start setting up things so that we’re not being sacrificed for capitalism.”

Callao adds that the group is optimistic about the outcome of the litigation and remains committed to its cause. “I know that People of Red Mountain will fight until they can’t fight anymore. They’re not giving up.”