

Tribal groups condemn federal plan to open up millions of Alaskan acres to mining interests

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More than two dozen Alaska tribes are protesting a Trump administration land-use proposal that, if approved, could open millions

of acres of wilderness to future mining in a large chunk of rural Alaska.

For the first time in decades, the Bureau of Land Management is taking steps to update resource management plans for 13.5 million acres it manages in the state's western and interior regions.

Agency officials say they won't select a final plan, known as the Bering Sea-Western Interior Resource Management Plan, until next year.

The agency announced its preferred plan in March, generating alarm among villages in an area larger than Switzerland, where subsistence hunting and fishing is the primary land-use, [tribal leaders](#) say.

The preferred proposal, known as Alternative C, would make mining an option on 13.4 million acres, nearly all the land under consideration. That's up from the current 8.7 million acres, established in plans developed in the 1980s.

Officials with the agency said last month that four land-use drafts are still on the table for possible selection, including two that would greatly restrict mining and other development compared to the preferred plan.

They say they're not ignoring the tribes. They have held dozens of public meetings in the region to understand tribal concerns as the draft proposals were developed in recent years.

"We are analyzing comments and taking them into consideration," said Ted Murphy, the agency's associate state director in Alaska.

The tribes say the agency has repeatedly ignored them. Officials have rejected their requests for special protections along rivers where they pick berries, hunt moose and fish for salmon, they say. That includes lands near the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers where they say mining

would be an optional activity for the first time.

This summer, 26 tribes from the state's northwest, southwest and interior regions formed the Bering Sea-Western Interior Tribal Commission to fight the proposal.

They argue that the agency wants to make a "massive change to allowable land use." Resource extraction is the "overriding principle" of the update to the land-use plan, according to a statement from the group last month.

"We want our watersheds in particular protected," said Paul Mountain, a group member and tribal administrator in Nulato village along the Yukon, about 300 miles west of Fairbanks. "We want to make sure our salmon will be there for future generations."

The proposal has drawn national attention, with left-leaning groups such as the Center for American Progress asserting that it's part of an effort led by the Trump Administration to "liquidate" federal lands for the benefit of commercial interests.

A major Alaska Native corporation and landowner in the area, Calista Corp., has told the agency it supports a land-use proposal, known as Alternative D, that could open the door for more development than the preferred plan.

Calista has also expressed concerns about the agency's interaction with tribes, including in a letter to the agency in September sent with Doyon Limited, another major Native corporation and landowner in the area.

Thom Leonard, a spokesman with Calista, said the regional Native corporation has "advocated for direct and proactive consultation" between the agency and tribes, Native village corporations and Calista.

Eric Tausch, a BLM spokesman, said in an email that it's very unlikely mining would actually occur on the land, based in part on minimal past interest.

Most of the acreage has low mineral potential, he said. Only about 564,000 acres has "medium-to-high" potential.

Also, mining would not occur without project-specific state and federal environmental permitting reviews and limits.

"It's important to understand that the Resource Management Plan does not authorize any specific activity," the email from Tausch said.

Mickey Stickman, first chief in Nulato, said the tribes don't oppose mining. They just want to protect fish spawning grounds and other areas that are important for wildlife.

He said he's not reassured by the agency's claim that mining probably won't occur. "If that's the case, then why open it up?" he said.

Eugene Paul, the chair of the new tribal commission, said the preferred plan could allow mining starting 10 miles outside Holy Cross along the Yukon River where he lives.

"We don't want it that close to our village," said Paul, first chief in that village of about 200.

"We live off the land," but the agency won't listen to the group's concerns, he said.

He and others say the tribes have asked the agency to designate millions of acres near rivers as "areas of critical environmental concern" to help protect important fisheries or cultural sites.

The preferred plan identifies no such areas, a fact sheet from the agency says.

However, that plan would include "some management actions to minimize impacts," the statement said. If [mining](#) were allowed, operators would have to meet the agency's best-management standards and practices, Tausch said.

Murphy said the agency had originally planned to make a final selection in November. With that date delayed, the agency has more time to review groups' concerns, he said.

"We have definitely had and will continue to have tribal consultations," Murphy said.

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