



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rocky Mountain Region / Black Hills National Forest

October 2023

# Renewable and Non-Renewable Energy and Mineral Resources

## Comments and Responses on Draft Assessment



Gold Mountain Mine, with a standing mill frame. Black Hills National Forest.  
(photo courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service).

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## **Introduction: Assessment Response to Comments**

The Black Hills National Forest received a variety of public comments on draft assessments published in June 2022. Some commenters have expressed support for the draft assessments, while others have expressed concerns.

Those who express concern about the draft assessments often state that they believe the assessments do not go far enough in addressing the challenges facing the Black Hills; do not address the needs of local communities; or do not utilize the best available scientific information. Those that support the draft assessments often state that they are pleased with the level of detail and analysis that went into the assessments. They believe it will provide a good foundation for the need to revise the land management plan.

The Forest Service has reviewed all public comment received on the draft assessments and used this feedback to revise assessments where appropriate. The table below is a detailed summary of public comment received related to energy and minerals as well as the agency's response to each item. Many responses indicate where the revised assessment has been modified to better explain each item, or incorporate new information as provided by cooperators or the public.

Each comment and response table is provided not as a matter of regulatory compliance, but as an effort to demonstrate the Black Hills National Forest's commitment to transparency early in the plan revision process. Some comments below have been generalized or combined with similar comments to provide a more efficient response. No attempt has been made to retain a link between each comment and individual, organization, or entity that provided it.

## Response to Comments

Comment	Responses
<p>This assessment, should complement, the Hydrological Assessment, to begin making the case for the aggressive withdrawal of mineral exploration and mining in watersheds serving the Rapid City drinking water. There are no modern large mines in the Black Hills National Forest area that did not result in becoming a Superfund Site, due to systemic, long-term pollution and contamination.</p>	<p>This assessment focuses on the evaluation of existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability for topics specific to management of national forest lands and resources. In general, the Land Management Plan will provide strategic and programmatic guidance and management direction rather than specific actions.</p>
<p>Assessment should address how existing corridors can be used for future energy corridors, instead of impacting new areas.</p>	<p>This assessment focuses on the evaluation of existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability for topics specific to management of national forest lands and resources. In general, the Land Management Plan will provide strategic and programmatic guidance and management direction rather than specific actions.</p>
<p>Assessment should address lithium. There is a large area of Forest Service currently under claims by United Lithium of Canada, south and west of Custer and perhaps this mineral and recent claim filing is worth mentioning. Since you are generally operating under the ridiculously out-of-date 1872 General Mining Law, I'm not sure what else anyone can do about gold, uranium, lithium and other potential mining on our public lands.</p>	<p>Thank you for the recommendation. Lithium has been added to list of locatable mineral resources found on the Forest. Development of lithium projects would occur through project planning rather than during development of the Land Management Plan which focuses on strategic and programmatic guidance.</p>
<p>Bear Lodge project, conducted by Rare Earth Element Resources, is targeting rare earth elements within the Black Hills National Forest this project is targeting neodymium, praseodymium, europium, cerium, lanthanum, dysprosium, terbium, gadolinium, samarium, yttrium, and erbium.</p>	<p>Thank you for the information. Additional information regarding Bear Lodge Project has been added to the Current Conditions and Trends discussion.</p>
<p>List of non-energy leasable minerals does not include rare earth elements.</p>	<p>Thank you for the recommendation. Rare earth elements were added.</p>

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<b>Comment</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Thorium is not a rare earth element, please remove.	Thank you for the information. Thorium was removed from the rare earth element list.
Generally, need more on rare earth elements and critical minerals (CM). The Forest Service completely omitted a discussion in the assessment regarding Rare Earth Elements (REE) and Critical Minerals (CM). Additional info provided by Crook County in Attachment A	Thank you for the recommendations. Information on critical materials/minerals and rare earth elements was added.
Review and incorporate Wyoming guidelines for wind and solar development and oil and gas development. <a href="https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Habitat/Habitat-Protection-Program/Resources-for-Development-Planning">https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Habitat/Habitat-Protection-Program/Resources-for-Development-Planning</a>	Thank you for the recommendation. The information was added to the assessment in the Data Gaps Identified section.
Point out that oil and gas exploration has ALSO occurred in the northwestern part of the Black Hills in Crook County. Those wells are plugged and abandoned.	Thank you for the recommendation. Information about oil and gas exploration in Crook County was added.
Disclose there will be impacts associated with renewable and non-renewable energy and mineral resources, including visual impacts and scenic integrity.	This assessment focuses on the evaluation of existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability for topics specific to management of national forest lands and resources.  Potential impacts from projects related to mineral or energy development would be considered during the planning and environmental analysis for those projects.
Assessment should consider Crook County Natural Resource Management (December 2, 2020, Photo Book 617, page 226, 228, 230) plan where appropriate. County generally supports mineral exploration and development for lands not lawfully designated for special use.	Thank you for the recommendation. This information was listed in the Data Gaps Identified section.

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<b>Comment</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<p>All plan updates must recognize development of renewable energy and extraction of non-renewable minerals inherently manipulates and consumes wildlife habitat and should establish formal state game agency consultation protocols with new plans.</p>	<p>Plan components will be considered during the Plan Development phase of the planning process. We look forward to hearing from Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) about plan component recommendations during that phase.</p>
<p>“Locatable Minerals” section on page 4, no mention is made of the over 184,000 acres of mining claims currently located in the Black Hills National Forest. This is more than 15% of the total Forest. Similarly, the same section uses numbers that are a year old to describe “current” mineral projects.</p>	<p>Thank you for the information. The following was added to the Data Gaps Identified section: “Updates to the most current account of mining claims, active and proposed mining projects, including exploration.”</p>
<p>According to our research, and counting only uranium, gold, rare earths, and lithium – that is, not counting hobby miners, mica, feldspar, etc. – there are currently at least 13 proposed or active exploration or mining projects in the Black Hills. There are also two companies with large numbers of claims that say – or that the State of South Dakota says – plan to become active again.</p>	<p>Thank you for the recommendation. Information was added to the Current Conditions and Trends section regarding projects currently under NEPA review. In addition, updating the most current mining claims and projects was added to the Data Gaps Identified section.</p>
<p>This also doesn’t count the over 1,300 old mines in the Black Hills, according to State of South Dakota numbers. One of these is a large unreclaimed open pit mine bordering a Black Hills city that is connected to a past Superfund site, and one is a current Superfund site. The draft assessment heavily under-emphasizes actual and potential exploration and mining impacts.</p>	<p>Thank you for the information. Information about Abandoned Mine Lands hazards was added to the Data Gaps Identified section.</p>

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<b>Comment</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<p>The management section is too vague and general. Again – it is boilerplate that needs to be fleshed out based on current information and on the situation in the Black Hills National Forest. The Forest Service has many management tools. This section should be about how each of those tools has been used over the last 25 years, what has worked, what has not worked, what public input has said about management, what tribal consultation has said about management, and how past and new tools might be used in the near future.</p>	<p>Thank you for the information. Some additional plans, resources, and data gaps have been added to the assessment. This assessment focuses on the evaluation of existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability for topics specific to management of national forest lands and resources. It is not intended to have exhaustive summaries of all related sources and management processes.</p>
<p>Hydroelectric power is being generated by the old Homestake Hydro 1, and Hydro 2 still exists in Spearfish Canyon but has been decommissioned.</p>	<p>Thank you for the recommendation. Information about the Spearfish Hydroelectric project was added to the assessment.</p>
<p>Data regarding mining operations within the Black Hills are available from a variety of South Dakota Agencies including DANR, Department of Revenue and Legislative Research Council. Data for mining projects on federal land is non-existent.</p>	<p>Thank you for the recommendation. The information from the South Dakota Department of Revenue and Research Council was added to the Data Gap Identified section.</p>

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<b>Comment</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<p>Locatable Minerals - This section recites the laws and history of mineral exploration and recovery. However, it omits a unique requirement for an exploration project. All exploration project activities conducted over the course of the last several generations have been granted categorical exclusion (CE) status. The process involves requesting the US Forest Service to review a plan of operation, making recommend changes to the plan and approving the request. This process provided an opportunity for the operators to begin drilling within several months. For the first time in the history of the Black Hills National Forest, F3 Gold was required to complete an Environmental Assessment. The F3 Gold POA was submitted in December of 2018 and has currently entered a 45-day objection period that will be followed by a 45-day objection review and a likely 30-day review extension. The result is a four-year process costing over \$500,000 before the anticipated approval of exploratory drilling on less than 5 acres total. The USFS should more clearly define the process for denying a CE and requiring an Environmental Assessment prior the final submittal of a POA.</p>	<p>This assessment focuses on the evaluation of existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability for topics specific to management of national forest lands and resources.</p> <p>Potential impacts from projects related to mineral or energy development would be considered during the planning and environmental analysis for those projects.</p>
<p>Makes it sound like the mine is still operating.... this is a standing mill frame on a historic site, is now an interpretive site with a walking path and informational signs</p>	<p>Thank you for the recommendation. The term "the only gold mine left" was removed to reduce confusion.</p>
<p>Please verify if these resources do exist. I know that some of them do, e.g., Crook County Natural Resource Management (NRM) Plan, as well as other County plans. These documents have been made available. In addition, please provide some verbiage as to why the resources that do exist, are not summarized?</p>	<p>Thank you for the information. Some additional plans and resources have been added to the assessment. This assessment focuses on the evaluation of existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability for topics specific to management of national forest lands and resources. It is not intended to have exhaustive summaries of all related sources.</p>