

# A Disaster Waiting to Happen

By Pete Dronkers

In December 2013, I travelled to Patagonia, Arizona, to meet the folks at the Patagonia Area Resource Alliance – a group working to protect their backyard mountain range from numerous mining exploration proposals. The most advanced of all these – Wildcat Silver's Hermosa Project – appeared to be a disaster waiting to happen.

The proposed 1,600-foot deep open pit silver mine (with some manganese production) would be perched at the upper reaches of the town's designated watershed, which supplies about half of its needs from municipal and private wells. Water that falls as rain at the mine site eventually works its way to town, picking up whatever pollutants may be in its path. The problem: the area is known for acid mine drainage, and most of the tiny historic mines that dot the mountain range have rendered surface and groundwater highly acidic and laced with heavy metals. Some have been tested at pH levels of 2.5 – the same as vinegar.

Beyond that, drought and existing water consumption in the broader region is depleting water well levels in Patagonia at an astounding 2-3 feet per year, yet the mine would consume at least 2,000 acre-feet of water per year – nearly 30 times more than the entire town. Not only does the mine appear to threaten water quality on a scale never before seen in the area, but it also threatens to greatly exacerbate already-problematic groundwater depletion rates.

With all this in mind, the Resource Alliance and Earthworks are collaborating on a research project that will clearly show the risks of this proposed mine and its impacts on the town's future. We're going to expose the truth. The mine cannot be built without extraordinary risks to this desert town's most precious resource: water.



**After experiencing 13 years of continuous drought, all water is precious.”**

– Wendy Russell,  
coordinator for the  
Patagonia Area  
Resource Alliance

## Ortiz: Public Risk, Private Reward

By Pete Dronkers

New Mexico's Ortiz Mountains are full of wildlife. Just south of Sante Fe, the area boasts 285 vertebrate species including collared lizards, whiptails, corn snakes, cougar, deer, and fox. Eighty species of birds including wren, Say's phoebe, blue grosbeak, Swainson's hawk and prairie falcon and at least seven species of bats. But if built, the Ortiz gold mine:

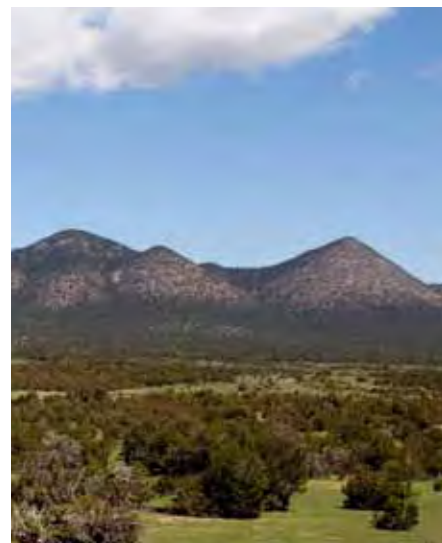
- would generate 169 metric tons of waste per ounce of gold recovered,
- could use as much water as nearly 8,000 New Mexicans and as much energy as over 5,000 households,
- is likely to emit over 600 million pounds of greenhouse gases over the life of the mine,
- would probably result in water pollution from acid mine drainage, which is prohibited by New Mexico state law.

Is the gold from this mine worth all the waste and destruction that it would cause? We don't think so.

➤ Read our report at [OrtizReport.earthworksaction.org](http://OrtizReport.earthworksaction.org)



The author about to take flight over the Patagonia Mountains. Photos by Pete Dronkers



Ortiz Mountains, New Mexico.  
Photo by Orlando Diaz