

Lawsuit Questions Forest Service Decision

By Ann Katzenbach

The Sunnyside mineral exploration drilling project in the Alum Gulch area of the Patagonia Mountains was given the go-ahead by the U.S. Forest Service back in September. In response to this decision, the Patagonia Area Resource Alliance and Defenders of Wildlife have asked a federal court to hold the USFS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service accountable for their approval, saying that it violates environmental laws and poses a potential threat to endangered species and the safety of drinking water for local residents.

Regal Resources, the Canadian-based company that oversees the Sunnyside project, proposes to drill multiple exploratory holes up to 6,500 feet deep

in the Patagonia Mountains—considered by naturalists to be one of the most biologically diverse areas in Arizona. The extensive drilling and construction would run all day and night for months on end and could go on for three years.

Since major mining halted in these mountains more than a half century ago, many species of wildlife have thrived there. Some—such as the jaguar, ocelot, lesser long-nosed bat, Mexican spotted owl, and western yellow-billed cuckoo—are imperiled. Of particular concern is the Mexican spotted owl. A federally designated Protected Activity Center has been set

aside for these owls in the Alum Gulch area. One of Sunnyside's drilling project sites is just one-tenth of a mile from their nesting sites.

In addition, Patagonia's municipal watershed probably will be compromised by this drilling, which will require 12,500 gallons of water per day.

Despite these concerns, the Sunnyside Project was approved. The lawsuit is seeking to require the USFS and FWS to adhere to their own regulations, by acknowledging the environmental impacts of the Sunnyside proposal.



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