

## **Groups stake claims to protect wilderness areas**

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*Eight of the claims are in the Cabinets*

SANDPOINT -- Conservation and watchdog groups are borrowing a page from the mining industry's playbook by staking claims on 1,000 acres of land throughout the West to protect it from development.

Eight of the claims were staked near the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness in Montana, which environmental groups say is imperiled by the proposed Rock Creek and Montanore mining projects.

The claims in Montana were among 50 claims filed Thursday by the Citizens Mining Co., a coalition of environmental groups lead by Westerners for Responsible Mining. Claims were also filed in five other states.

Claims were also filed on federal land near wilderness, wildlife and recreation areas in New Mexico, Nevada and Colorado.

The filings are aimed at protecting ecologically important areas and spurring federal mining law reform, according to Mary Mitchell, executive director of the Rock Creek Alliance, one of the groups aligned with Westerners for Responsible Mining.

The claims were filed under the 1872 mining law, a law conservation groups contend amounts to a sweetheart deal for the mining industry.

The claims in Montana, which cover about 160 acres, were filed in Sanders County, near Rock Creek meadows and the trailhead to Rock Lake.

"They, basically, are going to hold the claims to try and protect the area," Mitchell said on Thursday.

The claims rush coincides with the introduction of the Federal Mineral Development and Land Protection and Equity Act of 2005, a bill championed by U.S. Reps. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.), Jay Inslee (D-Wash.), and Chris Shays (R-Conn.). The bipartisan bill was expected to be introduced in Congress on Thursday.

The bill would bring fiscal reforms and set aside money for abandoned mine cleanup. It would also require mining companies to pay royalties on the minerals they extract, something which is lacking in 1872 mining law.

"One of the really important things is that it would allow land managers to have the discretion to say 'no' to a mine in an inappropriate place," Mitchell added.

U.S. Forest Service officials weighing the Rock Creek mine proposal have frequently said that federal hard-rock mining laws all but require them to say "yes."

The Rock Creek mine would tunnel beneath the wilderness from the west, while the Montanore would tunnel beneath from the east. The rich silver and copper ore bodies are also attracting claims from other companies, according to Mitchell.

"There's a lot of interest in that ore body, not just with the two major mines. We're seeing stuff pop up all the time," said Mitchell.

The mining projects in the Cabinets are seen by some in Idaho as a grave threat to water quality in Lake Pend Oreille, which gets its water from the Clark Fork River. Revett Minerals plans to discharge treated wastewater from the Rock Creek mine into the Clark Fork.

"The 1872 mining law fails to protect national treasures like the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness and Lake Pend Oreille from mining's destructive impacts because it prioritizes mining over all other land uses," said Bonnie Gestring, an organizer for the Western Mining Project campaign. "We intend to hold these claims until the outdated law is replaced with one that truly protects clean water, important fisheries and essential wildlife habitat."

Mitchell hopes this reform effort does not meet the same fate as previous ones.

"It's largely been Western senators who have opposed attempts in the past for mining reform, so they need to hear from their constituents that it's time to bring forward meaningful reform," she said.