Access to Public Lands for Mineral Exploration

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Issue

- The U.S. depends on minerals for economic growth and development, and for national security and defense.

- Public lands are an important, long-term source of essential minerals.

- Access to public lands for mineral exploration and development has become more difficult as large tracts of land have been designated for other uses.

- Mineral-bearing areas on public lands are routinely withdrawn or restricted from development before comprehensive resource inventories and economic assessments have been made.

Background

The United States is a mineral-rich nation. The U.S. has reserves of more commodity minerals and metals (78) than any other country. The current value of select mineral resources in the U.S. is estimated at $6.2 trillion*.

The U.S. is a significant consumer of minerals, both domestically produced and imported. According to the USGS, the value added to GDP by major industries that consume processed mineral materials in the U.S. is $2.3 trillion, which is 16% of the U.S. GDP of $14.7 trillion.

Minerals found on public lands include:

- Locatable minerals – including copper, iron, zinc, lead, rare earths and other strategic minerals, precious metal ores, and certain classes of industrial minerals
- Leasable minerals – including oil, gas, coal, oil shale, sodium, potash, phosphate, and all minerals within acquired lands
- Saleable minerals – including common varieties of construction materials and aggregates

The BLM administers mineral resources on 700 million acres of public lands, or about 1/3 the land mass of the entire U.S., most of it in 12 western states. Of the 700 million acres, 167 million have been withdrawn, and another 182 million acres are restricted from future development. BLM manages both surface and mineral rights of its public lands domain. BLM manages its surface and the mineral rights while other agencies manage only their surface. (Figure 1)

Public lands account for as much as 86 percent of the land area in certain western states. These same states account for 75 percent of our nation’s metals production. As such, access to federal lands for mineral exploration and development is critical to maintain a strong domestic mining industry.

The environmental impacts of mining on federal lands are addressed by a comprehensive range of federal and state laws and regulations. These create a rigorous set of mining and reclamation standards for the domestic exploration and mining industry that are emulated world-wide.
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SME Statement Of Technical Position

- Access to public lands provides the U.S. the opportunity to find and produce essential minerals, to significantly offset foreign mineral dependence, to decrease a growing trade deficit, to create skilled jobs, and to help solidify the nation’s economic security.

- Public lands should remain open and available for mineral exploration and development unless Congressional withdrawals or administrative actions are clearly justified in the national interest. A thorough geological and economic assessment should be made before any land is withdrawn.

- Given the lack of current and recurring geological assessment of many withdrawn areas, it is uncertain what minerals, and in what quantity and quality, occur on such lands. Periodic reassessments should be made of these lands.

- Mineral exploration and development usually requires a relatively small footprint and is a temporary land use that can occur concurrently or sequentially with other public resource uses.

- When mineral development occurs it must be held to the highest technical and regulatory standards in order to limit the environmental impact.

*Based on USGS estimated reserve base and USGS estimate of undiscovered deposits for the following mineral commodities: iron ore, copper, niobium, cobalt, gold, molybdenum, rare earths, silver, potash, bauxite, graphite, lead, zinc, mercury, strontium, sulfur, talc, magnesite, kaolin, lithium. Data sources: USGS Mineral Commodity Summaries (2009, 2010); Platts Metals Week (January 4, 2010); USGS 1998 Assessment of Undiscovered Deposits of Gold, Silver, Copper, Lead, and Zinc in the United States (Circular 1178).