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**Board of County
Commissioners**
Nye County, Nevada

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June 4, 2024

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Mr. Jon Raby
Nevada State Director
Bureau of Land Management
BLM Nevada State Office
1340 Financial Blvd.
Reno, NV 89502

Subject: Letter of support, endorsing the Amargosa Conservancy and its partners proposed Amargosa Valley Mineral Withdrawal boundary map as an appropriate area to be analyzed as part of an Administrative Mineral Withdrawal process to be initiated and executed by the Department of the Interior.

Dear Mr. Jon Raby,

This action is in keeping with the priorities of the county, specifically as executed through the Nye County Water District (NCWD). NCWD was formed to develop sustainable sources of water vital to long-term economic development, protection of the environment, and the well-being of the residents of Nye County. The NCWD service area includes all real property within the boundaries of Nye County, Nevada. One critical function of the district is to evaluate and mitigate the environmental impacts associated with resource use.

Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (the Refuge) is located within NV hydrographic Basin #230 in the southwestern portion of Nye County's First District, adjacent to the California/Nevada state line and to Death Valley National Park. The Refuge, established under the protection of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 1984, provides wetland habitat for more than 26 endemic species of plants, fish, amphibians, and other wildlife in the heart of the Amargosa Desert, a region known for extreme aridity and high desert temperatures. Within the Refuge is the Devils Hole: a disjunct portion of Death Valley National Park that provides habitat for the endangered Devils Hole pupfish. The Refuge and Devils Hole exist only due to the flow of both deep and shallow groundwater, originating from numerous upgradient basins and drainages within and beyond Nye County.

The Refuge and nearby Death Valley National Park act as significant draws for tourists from around the world seeking recreational opportunities. The flow of nearly 1.8 million visitors into Death Valley National Park contributes to the economies of communities such as Pahrump, Beatty, Amargosa Valley, and several others.

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Several recent proposals to conduct exploratory drilling operations near the Refuge and the township of Amargosa Valley indicate growing interest in mining and other extractive activities in this portion of Nye County. While Nye County is supportive of mining as a significant source of economic development in the county and in the state of Nevada, the risks involved in mining in this sensitive hydrological region outweigh potential benefits. Of greatest concern are both the acute impacts of drilling, open-pit excavation, and dewatering practices near the Refuge and Amargosa Valley, as well as the cumulative impact to groundwater resources resulting from large-scale development on public lands in this sensitive region. Disruption of hydrological flows into the Refuge risks significant imperilment of numerous sensitive and listed species protected by both the state of Nevada and the federal government. Additionally, mining activities in close proximity to the townships of Amargosa Valley, Crystal, and Johnnie risk negatively impacting domestic and commercial water rights holders who depend on these groundwater resources for their survival and economic opportunities.

These concerns have culminated in a desire put forth by a diverse coalition of local governments, Tribes, and nonprofit partners living and working in the Amargosa region for the managing agencies to withdraw a defined area of public lands surrounding the Refuge from new mineral entry in an effort to enhance protections for critical groundwater resources. The need for this action has been formally supported in recent months by the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe, in a previous letter from the Nye County Board of County Commissioners, Amargosa Valley Town Board, Beatty Town Advisory Board, and numerous other entities. This action, executed through the authority of the Secretary of the Interior, would achieve a temporary withdrawal of public lands for up to 20 years from new mineral entry in a defined area, with valid pre-existing mineral rights and operations retained.

To inform a mineral withdrawal boundary area, The Nature Conservancy Nevada Chapter has commissioned a hydrological analysis of Basin #230, which indicates significant potential for impacts to the Refuge and these communities resulting from mining activities on surrounding public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Through use of the U.S.G.S. Death Valley Regional Numerical Flow Model (DV3) – a flow model adopted by the Nevada State Engineer under Order 1330 for management of groundwater pumping applications in Basin #230 – researchers were able to approximate the scale and scope of impacts that could occur if proposed drilling and mining activities requiring dewatering as part of their operations were to be permitted near the Refuge.

The preliminary results of this study indicate significant, far-ranging, and conceivably catastrophic impacts to groundwater-dependent resources in the region resulting from dewatering activities required by mining projects, with springs and wetlands within the Refuge suffering groundwater declines of between 2 and 30 feet in some scenarios. Due to high hydrological connectivity and transmissivity in this area, the DV3 model illustrates potential groundwater declines across tens of square miles, which could have significant impacts on water rights holders in Basin #230.

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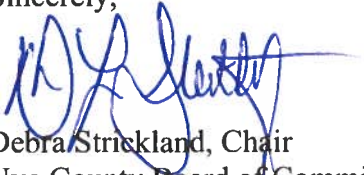
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We believe that the withdrawal area proposed by Amargosa Conservancy and formally supported by the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe, the Amargosa Valley Town Board, Beatty Town Advisory Board, and numerous nonprofit partners is necessary to protect this natural resource and underground basin, and it should be analyzed as part of the National Environmental Policy Act process. This action is in keeping with the mission of NCWD and is necessary to secure adequate safeguards for the groundwater relied upon both by the Refuge and by the local communities of Amargosa Valley, Crystal, and Johnnie in Nevada, and by multiple downstream communities in California.

We urge the Secretary of the Interior to direct the relevant managing agencies to expeditiously initiate an Administrative Mineral Withdrawal procedure, and to work with Congress and the constituents of Nye County and the Death Valley/Amargosa region throughout the analysis and environmental review processes. Nye County looks forward to providing input during this process to ensure a mineral withdrawal action aligns with the policies and priorities of the county as well as its constituent government entities, commercial operations, and residents.

Our board voted unanimously to approve this letter on the 4th day of June 2024.

Sincerely,



Debra Strickland, Chair
Nye County Board of Commissioners

CC:

The Honorable Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator
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