



DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Black Pine Gold Project, Cassia and Oneida Counties, Idaho

AGENCY: Forest Service, Agriculture.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service (Sawtooth National Forest) intends to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to assess and disclose effects from the proposed mine plan of operations (MPO) submitted by Liberty Gold (USA) Inc. for the development of the Black Pine Gold Project. The Forest Service is the lead agency, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Pocatello Field Office is a cooperating federal agency. This notice announces the beginning of a 30-day comment period to solicit comments and identify issues. The EIS will evaluate potential impacts of proposed open pit mining for gold and silver ores from National Forest System (NFS) and BLM administered lands and the processing of these minerals on BLM administered lands. The proposed action is expected to require a project-specific plan amendment to make the project consistent with the Sawtooth Forest Plan. The Planning, Administrative Reviews, and Litigation System identification number for the project is 68766.

DATES: This notice initiates a 30-day public comment process for the EIS. The Forest Service requests that the public submit comments on the alternatives or effects and on relevant information, studies, or analyses with respect to the proposal by **[INSERT DATE 30 DAYS FROM DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE *FEDERAL REGISTER*]**.

The complete EIS is expected two years from now. A schedule for the decision-making process and additional information about the project can be found here:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r04/sawtooth/projects/68766>. This project is a “covered project”

under section 41 of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST-41). FAST-41 provides increased transparency and predictability by requiring Federal agencies to publish comprehensive permitting timetables for all covered projects. FAST-41 also provides procedures for modifying permitting timetables to address the unpredictability inherent in the environmental review and permitting process for significant infrastructure projects. To view the FAST-41 Permitting Dashboard for the Project, visit:

<https://www.permits.performance.gov/permitting-project/fast-41-covered-projects/black-pine-gold-project>.

ADDRESSES: Additional information about the proposal; documents pertinent to this proposal; and direction regarding comment submission can be found on the following website: *<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r04/sawtooth/projects/68766>*.

Written comments

Send written comments to Minidoka Ranger District, 2306 Hiland Ave, Burley, ID 83318.

Comments may be submitted electronically to

<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=68766>.

Written public comments will be accepted by 11:59 p.m. Mountain Standard Time on **[INSERT 30 DAYS FROM THE DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE *FEDERAL REGISTER*]**. Comments submitted after this date may not be included in the analysis.

Public Scoping Process

The lead agency is planning to hold one virtual public meeting and one in-person public meeting. The specific dates and locations of these meetings will be announced in advance through the lead agency website (*<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r04/sawtooth/projects/68766>*).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Casey D. Johnson, Forest Supervisor, Sawtooth National Forest, by email at Casey.Johnson@usda.gov, by phone at 208-423-7501, or in writing at 370 American Avenue, Jerome, Idaho 83338.

Individuals who use telecommunication devices for the hearing-impaired may call 711 to reach the Telecommunications Relay Service, 24 hours a day, every day of the year, including holidays.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Liberty Gold (USA) Inc. submitted a proposed mine plan of operations (MPO) to the USFS Sawtooth National Forest and BLM Pocatello Field Office on February 27, 2025, proposing to develop the Black Pine Gold Project. The surface estate in the project area is administered by the Forest Service Sawtooth National Forest and the BLM Pocatello Field Office.

Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The purpose of the USFS and BLM actions is to respond to the applicant's proposal for the mining and development of precious metals from its unpatented mining claims and non-Federal mineral estates located on NFS and BLM administered lands in the project area, and land use authorizations requested for siting of proposed support facilities and infrastructure.

The need for USFS action is established by the agency's responsibilities under the Organic Administration Act of 1897 (16 U.S.C. 478, 482, and 551) and the locatable minerals regulations at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 228 Subpart A. In accordance with 36 CFR 228.5, the Forest Service must analyze and provide timely response to the submittal of an MPO. Furthermore, the Forest Service must assess whether the proposed operations will be conducted so as, where feasible, to minimize adverse environmental impacts on national forest surface resources in accordance with 36 CFR 228.8.

The need for BLM action is established by the agency's responsibility under the

Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) and BLM regulations at 43 CFR 3809 (Surface Management), 43 CFR 3715 (Use and Occupancy), 43 CFR 2800 (Rights-of-Way under FLPMA), and 43 CFR 2920 (Leases, Permits, and Easements) to respond to Liberty's proposal for mining activities, support facilities, and infrastructure proposed on BLM administered lands and take any action necessary to prevent unnecessary or undue degradation of public lands.

Preliminary Proposed Action and Alternatives

Under the Proposed Action alternative, the USFS and BLM would approve, with terms and conditions for the protection of surface resources and any necessary modifications to comply with applicable laws and regulations, the applicant's MPO, which describes the expansion of four existing open pits and the construction of four new open pits as well as development of mine infrastructure, ore stockpiling, and support facilities. Gold and silver bearing ore extracted via open pit mining methods, would be processed by way of a cyanidation heap leach facility to be constructed on adjacent BLM-administered lands. Additional support infrastructure such as mine office facilities, access roads, utilities, and water supply pipelines would also be constructed on BLM administered lands. The MPO incorporates reclamation and closure, monitoring, and mitigation activities throughout the life of the mine. Mine life is estimated at 17 years. Upon completion of mining operations, closure, drain-down of the heap leach facility, and final reclamation phases would occur over approximately 25 years with environmental monitoring and maintenance until reclamation is demonstrated.

Under the No Action alternative, the USFS and BLM would deny approval of the applicant's MPO. Under this alternative, the extraction and development of the applicant's mineral resource would not occur. Other alternatives to be considered in the EIS are expected to be variations of mine and facility configuration based on resource issues identified through the public comment process. The federal agencies welcome

comments on all preliminary alternatives as well as suggestions for additional alternatives.

Preliminary List of Substantive Issues and Expected Impacts

Substantive issues are those that meaningfully inform the consideration of reasonably foreseeable impacts of the proposed action or a decision on the alternative selected for implementation (7 CFR 1b.11(a)(53)). The following preliminary substantive issues are anticipated to be evaluated.

- Potential effects of development under the Proposed Action may include hydrologic effects (groundwater quality and quantity).
- Construction activities and operations could affect wildlife species and habitats including Greater sage grouse.
- Mining operations may impact cultural sites and/or historic properties and sites that are important to Tribal Nations.
- Construction and operation of a mine may impair the scenic environment and alter grazing allotments overlapping the proposed mine area.
- Potential for the mining operation to impact local air quality and the availability of suitable topsoils in service meeting final reclamation objectives.

Anticipated Permits and other Authorizations

The Applicant requires USFS and BLM approval of the MPO. In addition, the Applicant would need to obtain approvals from other regulatory agencies, including:

- Cyanidation permit to construct, operate, and close a cyanidation facility from Idaho Department of Environmental Quality
- Air quality Permit To Construct (PTC) from Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ)
- An approved mine operating and reclamation plan from the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL)

- Permanent Closure Plan for Cyanidation Facility from Idaho Department of Lands (IDL).

Comments and the Objection Process

This notice of intent initiates the NEPA timeline, which guides the development of the environmental impact statement. In this process the Agency is requesting comments on potential alternatives and impacts, and identification of any relevant information, studies, or analyses of any kind concerning impacts affecting the quality of the human environment.

This proposed action is subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process, also known as the objection process at 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B. A proposed rule to amend 36 CFR 218 was published in the Federal Register on February 6, 2026 (91 FR 5387), prior to the initiation of public comment in this NOI. This proposed action may be subject to the final rule amending 36 CFR 218 if the final rule takes effect before the objection period occurs for this proposed action. Otherwise, this proposed action will be subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process established prior to the proposed rule. The BLM will make a separate decision that will be subject to their post-decision appeal process (43 CFR Part 4 and 43 CFR Subpart 3809).

It is important that interested members of the public provide their comments at such times and in such manner that they are useful to the agency's preparation of the EIS; therefore, comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period and should clearly articulate the commenter's concerns and contentions. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, they will not be used to establish eligibility for the objection process.

Objections will be accepted only from those who have previously submitted timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project during a public comment period. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted, timely, and specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after designated public comment opportunities.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

Cooperating and Participating Agencies

The Forest Service is the lead federal agency, and the BLM is a cooperating federal agency in the preparation of the EIS. Based on specialized expertise and jurisdiction by law, Idaho Department of Lands, and Idaho Department of Environmental Quality are cooperating agencies.

Responsible Official

The responsible official for the Forest Service is the Sawtooth National Forest Supervisor. The scope of the Forest Supervisor's decision is to ensure the MPO is modified as necessary to comply with applicable laws and regulations and whether environmental mitigations are necessary under Forest Service jurisdiction. The responsible official for the BLM is the Field Manager for the Pocatello Field Office. The scope of the Field Manager's decision is limited to approval or denial of the MPO, including the proposed support facilities and infrastructure for lands under its jurisdiction.

Substantive Provisions of Forest Service 2012 Planning Rule Directly Related to Potential Plan Amendment

The proposed action is expected to require a project-specific plan amendment to make the project consistent with the Sawtooth Forest Plan. The combination of the existing site conditions and proposed impacts from new mine development collectively will not achieve mapped and adopted Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs). As such, implementation of the proposed action would continue to be inconsistent with Forest Plan Standard SCST01.

The 2012 Planning Rule, as amended, requires identification in the initial notice of the amendment of the substantive provisions that are likely to be directly related to the amendment. Based on the proposed Forest Plan amendment for the Black Pine Mine and requirements of the Planning Rule, the following substantive requirements of the 36 CFR 219 planning regulations would likely be directly related to the proposed amendment: §219.10 (a), *Integrated resource management for multiple use*, specifically (2): *Renewable and nonrenewable energy and mineral resources*, based on purpose of the project for which the amendment is needed, and (1) *“aesthetic value,” “scenery,”* and *“viewsheds,”* based on the purpose of the amendment to exempt the project from the Forest Plan visual quality standard.

Lisa Northrop,
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