

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Bureau of Land Management

Barstow Field Office

2601 Barstow Road

Barstow, CA 92311

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for PLAN MODIFICATION TO THE ASH MEADOWS MINE**

BLM SERIAL NUMBER: CACA106005810

DOI-BLM-CA-D080-2022-0010-EA

INTRODUCTION:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) based on the information contained in the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Proposed Action to drill 43 exploratory holes, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA, 42 United States [U.S.] Code [U.S.C.] Section 4321). This FONSI takes into consideration the environmental effects of surface mineral exploration activities at St. Cloud Mining's (SCM) Ash Meadows Exploration Project (Project) adjacent the existing Ash Meadows Mine. The site is approximately 4.9 miles (7.9 km) due east of Death Valley Junction, CA as shown in EA Appendix B: Figure 1, "Vicinity Map" and EA Appendix B: Figure 2, "Project Location." The exploratory drilling project will occur within portions of the SW ¼ of Section 10 and portions of the NW ¼ of Section 15, Township 25 North, Range 6 East on the Bole Spring 7.5-minute United States Geological Survey (USGS) Quadrangle map. The project is accessed from State Line/Bell Vista Road, approximately 4 miles north of Death Valley Junction CA (see Appendix B: Figure 3 and 3a).

St. Cloud Mining submitted a modification the Ash Meadows Plan of Operations (Plan), BLM case file number CACA106005810 (Legacy Serial Number CACA-030224 on March 21, 2022, to complete 43 exploratory drill holes disturbing less than 1 acre adjacent to the existing mine. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to authorize a Plan of Operation Modification to allow St. Cloud Mining the opportunity to explore, locate, and delineate zeolite deposits on its mining claims on public lands, as provided under the Mining Law. The need for action is established by the BLM's responsibility under Section 302 of FLPMA and the BLM Surface Management Regulations at 43 CFR 3809 to respond to a plan of operations to allow an operator to prospect, explore, and assess locatable mineral resources on public lands, and to take any action to prevent unnecessary or undue degradation of the public lands. The Plan modification was determined to be complete by the BLM on April 22, 2022. The EA was published for a 30-day public review period from April 4, 2024, through May 6, 2024. During this open public comment period, 159 public comments were submitted to the BLM, and a comment response matrix is provided in Appendix D of the EA.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Based on my review of the attached EA for the Plan of Operation modification to the authorized Plan of Operation, and supporting documents, I have determined that Alternative B, Proposed

FONSI

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Action, will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement (EIS) is not required. This finding is based on the degree of the effects described in the following affected environment section.

POTENTIALLY AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The Proposed Action would result in less than one acre of disturbance within the Amargosa North Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), which encompasses approximately 124,280 acres and has a one percent ACEC disturbance cap. As of this document, disturbance within this ACEC is at approximately 2,113 acres, or 1.7 percent of the total area (Livingood, personal communication, 3/9/22), which exceeds the 1 percent cap (approximately 1,248 acres) allowed for this ACEC. The proposed project is estimated to operate over a 1-2-month period, five days per week during daylight hours. Approximately 43 exploratory drill holes are proposed.

Impacts to the areas that could be affected by the Proposed Action (selected alternative) are also described by resource in the EA in Sections 3.1.1, 3.1.3, 3.2.1, 3.2.3, 3.3.1, 3.4.1, and 3.5.1. Each section provides a quantitative or qualitative analysis of impacts where appropriate in the context of the surrounding area.

Drill sites would be confined to the footprint of the cross-country access routes or drill lines (see Appendix B: figures 4 and 5). Drill holes will be located on 10 - foot centers (east - west), with drill lines spaced on 200 to 350 - foot centers (north - south), the latter being a function of the location of old drill holes drilled in the late 1970's and early 1980's and related geologic cross - sections. All drill holes will be up to 200 feet below ground surface (bgs), and up to 6 ¾ inch in diameter. Samples would be collected incrementally for geologic logging and analytical testing. After each drill hole is completed, the drill hole and associated surface disturbance (sump, trench, jack footprint, stockpile, rubber tub footprint, and working area around the drill hole) will be reclaimed prior to moving to the next drill hole. All water for the proposed action will be trucked from off-site locations to the site. Fuel used on-site would comply with CARB fuel quality requirements and stored in appropriate hazmat containers in accordance with all Federal, State and local and labeling and storage regulations.

DEGREE OF EFFECTS

The following have been considered in my evaluation of the selected alternative:

i. Short- and long-term effects

The Proposed Action (selected alternative) would result in short-term effects, 1-2 months, to the human and natural environment. No long-term effects from exploration activities are anticipated. Short-term effects include removal of vegetation for access and drilling of 43 exploratory holes. Short-term effects also include temporary removal of potential Mojave Desert tortoise habitat or impacts to Mojave Desert tortoise individuals (Section 3.2.3 of the EA). Reclamation will be concurrent, meaning each drill hole will be properly abandoned prior to proponent moving to the next drill location (Section 2.2.4.2 of the EA).

ii. Beneficial and adverse effects

The project lies within the DRECP's desert tortoise critical habitat map and is located within predicted suitable habitat. Desert tortoises in and around the vicinity of the project can be injured or killed through vehicle strikes. Noise may cause a tortoise to vacate an area for a quieter part of

its range. Indirectly, operations may reduce available habitat for the local population. A tortoise may void its bladder if mishandled, reducing its ability to survive. Relocating or movement of tortoises or tortoise burrows are not anticipated and is not authorized unless BLM consults with USFWS and a taking under the Endangered Species Act is authorized.

Under the Proposed Action, St. Cloud Mining has committed to specifically avoid the resources the Amargosa North ACEC is designated to protect, including biological and cultural resources, which is in line with the first provision of 40 CFR 1508.20 in relation to mitigation for ACECs to avoid impacts altogether by not taking a certain action or parts of an action.

All surface disturbance resulting from the Proposed Action (selected alternative) would be reclaimed concurrently from the start of Project. Monitoring for the success of reclamation of exploratory drill areas will continue until vegetation has been reclaimed.

As described in Section 2.2.4 of the EA, disturbance caps are not relevant to projects regulated under the Mining Law of 1872 and the requirements of 43 CFR 3809. With the implementation of the mitigation measures to avoid the protected resources of the Amargosa North ACEC (Appendix G), and commitment to Conservation Management Actions (CMAs) specific to ACECs (Appendix C), impacts to the Amargosa North ACEC would be negligible, short-term, and localized. Reclamation of disturbed areas would be completed concurrently for the drill holes, and revegetation monitored by the BLM.

iii. Effects on public health and safety

The adverse effects of the Project on both public health and safety would not be significant as St. Cloud Mining is required to follow the Mine Safety and Health Administration regulations and other Federal, State, and local regulations for mineral exploration activities. St. Cloud Mining is also required to maintain all equipment and facilities in a safe and orderly manner. Through compliance with required CMA's and Mitigation measures (Appendix G of the EA), the project would not result in potentially substantial or adverse impacts to public health and safety.

iv. Effects that would violate Federal, State, Tribal, or local laws protecting the environment

The Proposed Action does not violate any known Federal, State, Tribal, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The project would comply with the performance standards in 43 CFR 3809.420 and other Local, State and Federal laws related to environmental protection.

See EA Chapter 4 for a description of the consultation list.

Marc Stamer, Field Manager
Barstow Field Office