



ALASKA MINERALS COMMISSION



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Alaska Minerals Commission

The 11-member Alaska Minerals Commission (AMC) serves in an advisory capacity to the Governor and the Alaska State Legislature. Five members are appointed by the Governor (one of whom must reside in a rural community), three members are appointed by the President of the Senate, and three members are appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The State of Alaska Division of Community and Regional Affairs supports the AMC by facilitating their annual meetings and assisting with the annual report.

The Commission's role is to recommend strategies to mitigate constraints on mineral development in Alaska. Created by the Legislature in 1986, the AMC's authorization was extended through June 30, 2034 by the Legislature in 2023 via House Bill 103. Since its establishment, the AMC has worked with the State of Alaska and Alaska State Legislature to successfully implement key recommendations that support a strong and sustainable Alaska minerals industry. This report builds upon past work with the intent to identify state and federal issues that can block responsible development.



Figure 1: Hecla Mining Company, the operator of the Greens Creek mine in southeast Alaska, emphasizes environmental stewardship in its operations. Like many mining companies, it periodically conducts environmental monitoring to verify the effectiveness of their environmental protections and compliance with the State's high regulatory standards.

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Figure 2: Mines invest in advanced technologies to minimize their environmental impact. This includes employing modern equipment and processes that reduce emissions, waste, and energy consumption.

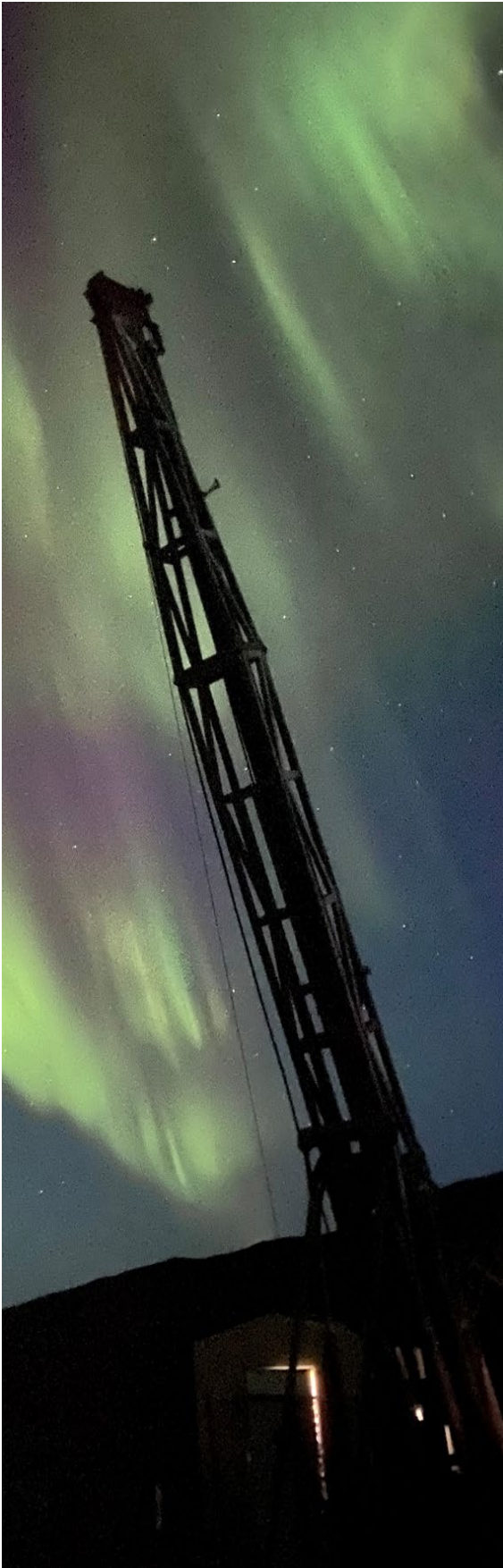


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INTRODUCTION

Mining is a cornerstone of our society and economy, supporting all aspects of our everyday life. The minerals industry is the source of raw materials used in the production of critical components for technology we use daily, from cell phones and computers to clean technologies like electric vehicles and solar panels. It provides the minerals and metals used in construction and electricity generation, and every industry that drives our state and local economies. In Alaska, the mining industry has demonstrated its ability to help diversify the economy and provide wide-ranging employment opportunities in both rural and urban areas, supporting rural infrastructure and lowering the cost of living, all while operating at the highest environmental standards.

Mining is a fundamental component of the statewide five-year Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), developed in 2022 by the State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development. Mining helps to create a diversified economy and Alaska has a stable fiscal environment in which all businesses can thrive. Increased minerals development and exploration in Alaska can help increase fiscal stability and economic development, helping to achieve Governor Dunleavy's priorities to grow the state's economy and promote the "Alaska is Open for Business" initiative.

Alaska has six operating large hard rock mines, one large coal mine, and approximately 150 small placer mines¹. Alaska's major mineral deposits currently in production include the Red Dog Mine in the Northwest Arctic region; the Greens Creek and Kensington in the Southeast region; and the Pogo and Fort Knox Mines in the Interior region. The Usibelli Coal Mine is the state's only active coal mine, providing coal for Interior Alaska power plants. Additionally, there are numerous active mining exploration projects across Alaska, spanning various minerals like gold, silver, copper, zinc, and more.

According to the McKinley Research Group², together these operations provided 5,400 direct jobs in 2021, employing residents from throughout. In total, mining provided 10,800 direct, indirect, and induced jobs in 2021, with a total direct and indirect payroll of \$985 million. Mining provides some of the highest paying jobs in the state of Alaska, with an average annual wage of \$117,888 in 2020. In addition, in 2021, the State of Alaska received \$83 million in revenues from the mining industry from license fees, rents, royalties, material sales, and other fees. Local governments received an estimated \$44 million from taxes, payment in-lieu of taxes (PILT), payments in-lieu of development (PILD), and rents or production revenue from material sales, and about \$164 million in payments to Alaska Native Corporations³.

The mining industry pays an Alaska corporate income tax of up to 9.4 percent of income, which is the same for all corporations in the State of Alaska. The mining industry also pays up to 7 percent of net profits as an additional mining license tax, which applies to all mining operations (including royalty owners), regardless of size, land status, mineral ownership, or location. Mining operations on State of Alaska land pay an additional 3 percent net profit royalty. Large mining operations are also significant taxpayers in their communities, paying property taxes in the Fairbanks and Juneau boroughs and a payment in lieu of taxes in the Northwest Arctic Borough.

The AMC commends State of Alaska leadership on actions taken to improve the minerals exploration, development, and production climate in Alaska. The AMC presents this 2023 report with multiple priorities and corresponding recommendations.

[1] Twelker, Evan, Werdon, M.B., and Athey, J.E., 2022, Alaska's Mineral Industry 2020: Alaska Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys Special Report 76, 75 p. <https://doi.org/10.14509/30848>

[2] Alaska Miners Association, Council of Alaska Producers. The Economic Benefits of Alaska's Mineral Industry. McKinley Research Group, May 2022.

[3] Ibid.

TOP PRIORITY

Develop a ‘Comprehensive Mineral Development Plan’ for Alaska

With each passing year, the supply chain issues that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, increased competition with China, and Russia’s war with Ukraine remind us of the need for secure domestic supply of minerals. At the Federal level we have seen supportive policies, legislation and increased funding, and development of strategic plans for minerals deemed critical to the U.S. economy and national security.

Alaska is uniquely positioned to play a leadership role in meeting demand for a domestic mineral supply. Forty-nine of the fifty minerals identified as critical to the U.S. economy and national security in 2022 are found in Alaska. With a proven mining industry and a government that is supportive of natural resource development, Alaska is an attractive market for investment in mineral development projects.

However, mining in Alaska is not without challenges for potential investors. The remoteness and lack of infrastructure are real obstacles to new development; antidevelopment sentiment often sourced from outside the state negatively affects the permitting process; and the state’s workforce often lack the necessary skills.

As state leadership and agencies continue to promote the development of mineral resources in Alaska, the need for a plan for that development has grown. Currently, projects or decisions that are external to but impact the mining industry, such as infrastructure, education, outreach, and workforce development, occur in separate silos. A comprehensive and strategic plan could coordinate these and other considerations into an integrated state-wide approach supportive of continued mineral development.

While such plans exist at the Federal level, to the knowledge of this commission no individual U.S. state has yet developed a comprehensive mineral development plan. This is in contrast to other countries with strong mining industries – for example, each of the Canadian provinces has their own mineral development plan that aligns their local mineral resource industries with Canada’s nationwide objectives. By being the first state in the nation to create a comprehensive mineral development plan, we can demonstrate Alaska’s continued leadership in mineral and natural resource development.

Mining can be the catalyst the State of Alaska needs for the sustainable economic development of the regions around mines and the State as a whole. With a comprehensive approach, we can create truly thriving communities that in turn support a thriving minerals industry, resulting in enduring prosperity well beyond the life of a single mine.

In addition to land use, permitting, and environmental stewardship, our State comprehensive mineral development plan should include:

Infrastructure

A key factor preventing new mines coming online is the need for infrastructure including access and power. Alaska has the most limited infrastructure network in the nation. Mineral development companies must incorporate the cost to design, construct, and maintain infrastructure to make their projects viable. For this reason, most mineral projects in Alaska are also infrastructure projects. The mines and exploration projects that are (or could be) connected to existing infrastructure are significant stakeholders in projects that seek to expand and modernize that infrastructure.

State Priorities:

- 1) Predictability of the State of Alaska permitting timeframes
- 2) Reallocate portions of the State of Alaska mining license tax to communities, while precluding targeted local severance taxes
- 3) Support the Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys
- 4) Support education and outreach for mineral development
- 5) Modernize the online mineral claim staking and claim management system

Federal Priorities:

- 1) Industry must have clear Federal permitting and regulatory requirements

Top Priority (cont.)

It is important that existing and future infrastructure projects continue to support a growing mineral industry in Alaska. Projects that seek to improve or modernize transportation and shipping routes, electricity generation and distribution, and energy needs should incorporate criteria into their evaluation that sustains and enables the next generations of the Alaskan mineral industry.

The state must study and evaluate the mineral potential of the various mining districts and create access and power solutions to facilitate development. This can be achieved through partnerships with industry, communities, and other organizations who could work together on projects of mutual interest, share risks, and combine resources for the benefit of all.

Workforce Development

New mines mean additional labor demand, including skilled labor such as engineers, technicians, operators, maintenance personnel, and a host of other expertise. These are high wage and life altering career opportunities for those in the industry. Alaska's unique operating conditions necessitate a home-grown workforce that understands those conditions and thrives in them. Any initiative to expand minerals development must also address the associated labor needs. Home-growing the workforce to meet this demand will require investment across all sectors of workforce development, from Management and Engineering programs in the University of Alaska system to vocational and technical training facilities.

Dialogue

A successful plan to develop the state's mineral resources must consider the interests and benefits of all Alaskans. For that reason, a successful planning process needs to include the input of residents, community planners, landowners, and advocate groups.

Education

Mining development projects in Alaska do not avoid public opposition. Too often this is the result of a lack of understanding about the industry and the materials that are necessary to support our modern lifestyles. Frequently, opposition is driven by fears inspired by antidevelopment advocate groups. The mining industry has been investing in education programs to help residents understand why minerals are needed, where minerals originate, and how they are extracted safely and in an environmentally protective and socially responsible manner. However, the state must also support such educational training and outreach, helping residents understand the benefits and values of mining locally and responsibly.

Continued State Support

The State has already demonstrated its support for mineral and natural resource development in a variety of ways. Declaring Alaska "open for business", and ongoing support of State agencies such as the Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys (DGGs), as well as the Unlocking Alaska initiative, have been central to the State being positioned as it is to lead the way on Critical Minerals development. There are numerous projects underway at DGGs and other state agencies to map and collect data on mineral resource deposits in support of development. It is important that this support continues if mineral development is to scale up.

One of the challenges in mineral development projects is permitting. The permitting process does and must continue to incorporate high standards for responsible development. However, its unpredictability injects uncertainty and risk into mineral projects that stagnates the development timeline and will be at odds with the stated goals of rapid critical minerals development. Much of this is due to factors out of state control; however, it is important that at the state level agencies are staffed and organized to optimize the permitting process, and that the state pushes back if and when projects are held up at the federal level.

STATE PRIORITIES

1. Predictability of the State of Alaska Permitting Timeframes

Processing of permit applications within the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) are often delayed due to a shortage of personnel resources to handle the volume of applications. Mineral resource operators must have predictability in the timeframes associated with review, processing, and adjudication of permits to ensure uninterrupted work and encourage investment in the State of Alaska's mineral resources.

Current Alaska demand has permitting agencies operating at capacity to issue decisions and permits.

The State of Alaska needs the capability to issue additional decisions and permits in a predictable manner for projects. This action will show investors that the State of Alaska's permitting system is robust and able to adapt to priorities and demand.

Recommendations:

- Support the development of tools to track the processing of permit applications with transparency for the application progress and accountability for the State of Alaska in meeting required timeframes.
- Support funding of additional State of Alaska personnel positions for timely processing of permit applications.
- Seek ways to minimize employee turnover in State of Alaska departments. A report on labor rates is expected in 2024. The Governor and the Legislature should review this report and act accordingly to improve employee retention and attract qualified, experienced personnel to the permitting and regulatory agencies.

2. Reallocate portions of the State of Alaska mining license tax to communities, while precluding targeted local severance taxes

The AMC believes that communities should benefit when natural resource exploration and development occurs nearby. Whether related to large scale long-term mining or short-term seasonal prospecting, the economic boost to local economies from mining and mineral development may generate increased demand for local government services. Communities could benefit from a reallocation of the State of Alaska Mining License Tax (AS 43.65).

Presently, there is no uniform mechanism to allocate a portion of the tax revenue back to communities associated with mineral development. Such a revenue-sharing model could provide needed assistance to communities³.

Sharing portions of State of Alaska revenue from mineral resource development with local communities in a predictable fashion reduces the need for local governments to impose their own industry targeted taxes, such as severance taxes. The uncertainty of the timing, stability, and size of a local tax could discourage mineral development. Moreover, allowing local governments to impose potentially onerous severance taxes shifts control of development decisions away from the State of Alaska.

Recommendations:

- Allocate portions of the statewide mining license tax to communities located near mining operations in order to create a stable economic regime that can provide an attractive investment climate in Alaska.
- Revise the municipal tax code to preclude local municipal severance taxes on mineral resources. This revision would not prevent a local government's ability to utilize a broad-based tax⁴, such as a property tax or sales tax.

[4] The fishing industry has an informal means to split taxes between the state and the local communities. This approach would adopt the concept but be more specific in the division of revenues.

[5] Both the Fairbanks North Star Borough and the City and Borough of Juneau benefit from broad-based taxes that include local mine operations.

3. Support the Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys

The Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys (DGGs) within DNR plays an integral role in identifying Alaska mineral resources, mineral potential, and attracting investment to the State of Alaska. Their work includes collecting new geologic data, quickly publishing that data, and maintaining an extensive publicly available database. This database is commonly a first stop for explorers looking to invest funding within the State of Alaska.

In November of 2021, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) released a draft list of 50 minerals which are deemed critical to the development of the country's economy⁵. The United States is dependent on unpredictable foreign producers such as China, Russia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo for many of its critical mineral supplies, which results in unacceptable risk to national and economic security. Many of these minerals (especially zinc, graphite, and cobalt) are found within established mineral belts across Alaska. DGGs' publicly available data provides explorers an advantage when selecting areas to claim on State of Alaska land, and therefore makes that investment more attractive when compared to other states or countries that lack such information.

Much of Alaska's 663,000 square miles of land (more than one sixth of the total area of the United States) "has not been systematically studied or sampled for mineral resource potential"⁶. Now tasked by both Alaska's Legislature and the USGS, DGGs must be well supported in its further efforts to identify where critical minerals are to be found. Federal funding is vital and currently available, but State of Alaska matching funds are necessary to maximize federal support. The State of Alaska has previously supported these efforts through the Airborne Geophysical/Geological Mineral Inventory (AGGMI) program. The AMC recommends the State of Alaska continue to provide matching funds for grants and funding opportunities available through the federal government. The data produced by such efforts will have a long-term positive impact on attracting exploration dollars to the state.

Another critical support for DGGs is the continuation and growth of the Geologic Materials Center (GMC). The GMC hosts the State of Alaska's archives for geologic samples collected by mineral, oil, and gas exploration companies as well as state and federal agencies. Core repositories such as the GMC are commonplace in states that host significant mineral resources. Samples in the State of Alaska archives date back to the early 1900s and contain a wealth of information that can lead to additional discoveries based on information collected by modern analysis. The GMC archives contain over 18 million feet of core samples and cuttings from oil and gas exploration and 565,000 linear feet of drill core samples from mineral companies. They also contain 507,000 surface samples and over 35,000 thin sections⁷.

Finally, DGGs' role in promoting the State of Alaska at international mining conferences – where local experts can showcase our mineral potential, investment climate, and interact with investors – needs ongoing support. Roughly 80 percent of the funding for mineral exploration in Alaska is from companies housed outside of Alaska, most recently from Canada and Australia. These outreach activities are how the State lets the world know that Alaska welcomes mineral and mining investment.

Recommendations:

- The Governor and Legislature should continue to support assessment of Alaska's critical minerals. Airborne geophysical surveys, geological mapping, and mineral inventories are activities that can be funded through annual capital appropriations to the operating budget. Investing in these state-funded programs will, in turn, ensure federal funds are maximized.
- Where needed, the Governor and Legislature should provide matching funds to enable DGGs to access federal funds.
- Continue support for the GMC to host and maintain a core repository and ability to conduct analysis on samples.
- Funding should continue to support attendance by DGGs and DNR at international and national mining conferences to promote Alaska's mining industry.

[6] USGS Seeks Public Comment on Draft List of 50 Minerals Deemed Critical to US National Security and the Economy, accessed November 2021, <https://www.usgs.gov/news/national-news-release/usgs-seeks-public-comment-draft-list-50-minerals-deemed-critical-us>

[7] U.S. Geological Services, 2017, Geospatial Analysis Identifies Critical Mineral-Resource Potential in Alaska Fact Sheet

[8] GMC Curator Kurt Johnson, personal communication, November 2021.

4. Support Education and Outreach for Mineral Development

The Alaska Minerals Commission (AMC) recognizes the crucial role of resource extraction in supporting our way of life and technological advancements. We believe that educating the public, particularly our youth, about the significance of resource management is essential for a sustainable future.

We commend the work of Alaska Resource Education (ARE) in providing school-aged children with resource industry-specific education and engaging the broader public, educators, and public officials to foster a deeper understanding and acceptance of resource extraction practices. ARE's efforts have been instrumental in bridging the knowledge gap between the general public and the resource extraction industry.

The Need for Comprehensive Resource Education

Effective resource management requires a well-informed society. This includes:

- **Educating schoolchildren:** Instilling an understanding of resource extraction's role in their future. ARE plays a key role in providing this education.
- **Equipping educators:** Empowering teachers to effectively educate students about resource needs, impacts, and management practices. ARE collaborates with educators to enhance their understanding of these topics.
- **Enhancing public awareness:** Raising public knowledge about their role in shaping resource policy. ARE actively engages the public through informative surveys and information dissemination.
- **Informing policymakers:** Ensuring legislators understand the necessity of resource production and the potential consequences of their decisions. ARE provides policymakers with research and insights to inform their decision-making.

Balancing Resource Development and Environmental Protection

The AMC acknowledges the challenges associated with resource extraction but believes that compromise is possible. We advocate for:

- **Collaborative industry-educator partnerships:** Fostering firsthand knowledge of resource extraction practices. ARE facilitates these partnerships between industry and educators.
- **Public-private engagement:** Encouraging public participation through informative surveys and information dissemination about resource production's benefits. ARE actively engages the public in this process.
- **A balanced regulatory framework:** Striking a balance between resource development and environmental protection to support communities and promote sustainable practices. ARE provides input on regulatory frameworks to ensure they balance environmental protection and economic development.

Recommendations

The AMC urges the government to:

- **Continue to support ARE and provide funding opportunities:** Increased financial support will enable ARE to broaden its outreach, reach more Alaskans, and deepen its impact on resource education and understanding.
- **Expand ARE's outreach and impact:** ARE's reach and impact can be further expanded by developing new educational programs, partnering with additional schools and communities, and increasing its online presence.
- **Provide incentive encouragement to generate public-to-private engagement:** Encourage public participation by providing incentives for completing informative surveys and engaging in public forums on resource extraction topics. This will broaden the education of the public at large.

By investing in ARE's growth and expansion, the State of Alaska can empower its citizens to make informed decisions about resource management, ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future for generations to come. The AMC urges the government to recognize ARE's exceptional work and by investing in ARE's growth and expansion, the state of Alaska can empower its citizens to make informed decisions about resource management, ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future for generations to come. The AMC urges the government to recognize ARE's exceptional work and provide the necessary resources to amplify its efforts in educating and engaging the Alaskan community.

5. Modernize the online mineral claim staking and claim management system

Alaska's system for acquiring mineral rights is antiquated and is a disincentive for would-be explorers, developers, and miners. It is recommended that Alaska investigate moving to an online claim staking system using an interactive website. This website should allow for real-time viewing of mineral claim status and online submission of claim applications and maintenance. Many modern jurisdictions around the world have adopted such systems. The result has been increased exploration and development of mineral resources and efficiency and cost savings for government.

In order to acquire mineral rights on state land in Alaska, an individual or company must place corner posts in the ground with appropriate markings that document the identity of the claimant and the date upon which the posts were placed. The post may be a squared-off tree, a four-foot-long 4 inch by 4 inch post, or as has become common practice, a four-foot-long steel "rebar" post with a 4 inch by 4 inch wooden block mounted at the top. If a large tract of claims is staked, many thousands of posts may be necessary. Often the posts are placed by dropping them from a helicopter or fixed wing aircraft. Once placed, the claimant has up to 45 days to record a Notice of Location with the appropriate Mining Recorder, at which time fees are paid. Claims are maintained by paying annual rental to the State of Alaska and by doing exploration, development, or mining on the claims. Under the Meridian-Township-Range-Section (MTRS) grid system, the claim posts are meant to be placed at the corner of each quarter section for 160 acre claims, or at the corners of each quarter-quarter section for 40 acres claims. Prior to staking, the claimant must review land status on the DNR website to determine if the land in question is (1) State of Alaska land open for mineral entry, and (2) not already been claimed by another party.

The DNR website is called AlaskaMapper. It is an interactive map that shows land status. Information on mining claims may be obtained by clicking on the plotted claim. Unfortunately, DNR is unable to keep the site up to date. This presents two problems: (1) claims may have been abandoned by an owner, but since AlaskaMapper is not up to date, the land still appears to be claimed; and (2) there is risk that claims have been staked by a competing party but not yet reflected on AlaskaMapper in which case a new claimant may waste time and money staking claims on land that has already been claimed by others. Diligent stakers also check the Mining Recorder's website to see if there has been recent staking activity. However, since there can be a 45-day window from staking date to recording date, there is still risk that money will be wasted staking claims that have already been staked by others.

The current AlaskaMapper creates a disincentive for claim staking and the exploration and development that follows. Many more claims would be staked if would-be developers could see accurate real-time land status through an interactive on-line system from anywhere in the world and could have the ability to stake claims using the same online system. Fees would be immediately collected by the State of Alaska, and subsequent claim rentals would be paid through the online system. Such a system would allow DNR staff to be more efficient. Additional mineral exploration, mineral discovery, mineral development, and mining would result from these changes. After the initial cost to change the system, DNR would likely save money on staff time, and the State of Alaska would realize significantly increased revenue from claim rentals and mining taxes.

Recommendations:

The state's Division of Mining, Land and Water (DMLW) has recently solicited a Request for Proposals for an independent consultant to review the systems and workflows and recommend efficiencies. The analysis is meant to evaluate all of DMLW workflows including claim management and permitting. The Commission recommends that the DMLW encourage the selected consultant to fully consider developing an online staking and tenure management system for State of Alaska mining claims. The analysis will have to consider the legal barriers which may exist to implementing the online system. Also, a Cost-Benefit analysis should be done. If findings are positive, the State of Alaska should institute an online claim staking system with real time up-to-date claim map.



Figure 3: Mining projects regularly engage with local communities, seeking to understand concerns and address them. This can involve collaborating on environmental initiatives or supporting community development projects. In addition, companies often support social programs of importance to the communities where they operate.

FEDERAL PRIORITIES

1. Industry Must Have Clear Federal Permitting and Regulatory Requirements

Since statehood, the federal government has failed to give Alaskans and the State of Alaska many of the rights and resources it was granted at statehood. The federal government has pursued a policy to hinder the access and rights of Alaskans to use and enjoy the resource benefits on private and State of Alaska lands. This overreach from the federal government restricts the State's uses of its resources and also inhibits Alaskan's use and development of the resources they are entitled to in the state.

Recommendations:

- The Legislature and Governor should continue to fund and support both DNR and the Alaska Department of Law in legal challenges against the federal government to assert the State of Alaska's rights against the federal government.
- The Governor and Legislature should continue to support exemption of the Tongass National Forest from the Roadless Rule. The United States Department of Agriculture recently added 9.4 million acres of roadless area to the 6.5 million acres already set aside by Congress in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) and the Tongass Timber Reform Act of 1990. The addition of roadless acreage makes access to critical minerals more difficult and is inconsistent with the "no more" clause of ANILCA.
- The Governor and Legislature should support funding State primacy over the Clean Water Act Section 404 permit program and Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation formulation of regulations for the filling of State of Alaska waters and wetlands.
- The Governor and Legislature should closely monitor the Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Army Corps of Engineers following the Supreme Court decisions of EPA v. Sackett. Support and advocate that adjacent wetland should only be considered waters of the United States when there is a continuous surface connection to a Traditional Navigable Water (TNW) or a tributary of a TNW, following the guidance of the Court.



Figure 4: Mine exploration, the initial phase of discovering and evaluating mineral deposits, can bring potential benefits to local communities, although these benefits might not be as immediate or tangible as those during the operational phase, including: Employment opportunities, local business opportunities, infrastructure development, training and skill developments, increased economic activity, and community engagement and consultation.

The Alaska Minerals Commission appreciates the public’s interest in these issues and the support of the Alaska minerals industry. Please feel free to contact the Alaska Minerals Commission with comments or concerns at any time.

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SELECTED MINES IN ALASKA

