

The Threat

As of April of this year, the Federal Government is proposing to let an Australian company, Jindalee Lithium, explore for lithium mining in Southeastern Oregon, in the McDermitt Caldera, which is the ancestral and current homelands of the Fort McDermitt Paiute, Shoshone and Bannock tribes.

The McDermitt Caldera is an ancient extinct super volcano that has lay dormant for 16 million years. It spans 28 miles in the high desert that rests on the so-called border of Oregon and Nevada. It is home to sage grouse, pronghorn, golden eagle, threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout, and bighorn sheep. It is also home to a tiny springsnail called the Kings River Pyrg, which is endemic to the caldera. Due to long-quiet volcanic activity, the caldera is geologically diverse, containing various lava flows, sediments and kinds of rock, as well as deposits of uranium and mercury; and possibly the worlds' largest supply of lithium.

Jindalee Lithium, if the exploration project is approved, will explore for about 5 years and then build a mine on the Oregon border. A lithium mine is already being built on the Nevada side by a company called Lithium Americas, after years of resistance on behalf of the tribal communities whose history and buried ancestors are held in the McDermitt Caldera.

Environmental and Human Impact

Lithium is used to make lithium-ion batteries, which power our devices and vehicles. It became especially desired since the electric car boom. Although lithium is being cast as a saving grace in a world facing climate change, the reality could not be further from "green". According to the documentary Mining the Sacred, the mine being built at Thacker Pass, on the Nevada side, will be 6,000 acres wide with an open pit going to a depth of 400 feet. Adjacent to the mine will be toxic tailings ponds where the by-products of mining are stored.

They will have to build lithium processing facilities, which include a sulfur plant. Sulfur is a waste by-product of oil refineries and will have to be trucked in from afar and burned every day at the processing facilities. The mine will use 1.7 billion gallons of water each year in a region that is permanently in a drought. There will be 2.3 tons of carbon released for every ton of lithium that is processed. Mines are toxic to the lands and the communities that live near them. Toxic tailings ponds leech chemicals into the groundwater and are often buried in place.

Just as terrifying for indigenous communities, is the risk of “man camps” that are built when mines are under construction and while workers are mining. Man camps are the temporary housing facilities created when male workers, often on contract and underpaid, come to work on industrial projects in Indigenous communities without their families. Indigenous women have reported that the influx of workers into their communities to further extractive projects leads to an increase in sexual and other kinds of violence. The National Inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada released a report in 2019 of findings about this specific type of violence, as well as makes suggestions to corporations and the government about how to address and lessen this harm.

Indigenous Land and History of Struggle

A nearly 5-year struggle has already taken place over the mines on the Nevada side of the project. The McDermitt Caldera is tribal land, currently administered by the BLM. Thacker Pass and Sentinel Rock, in the southern part of the caldera, are sacred to the tribes because of two massacres that took place nearby. Most notably, on September 12, 1865, US Calvarymen killed between 30 and 70 Paiute people near Sentinel Rock. In one of the massacres, human remains were

gruesomely left at the scene causing a foul stench. For this reason, the name of the site is Pee hee Muh'huh, which means Rotten Moon in the Paiute language and was named in remembrance of the massacre. As a burial ground, the site should have been subject to protections under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the Historic Preservation Act.

The federal government fast tracked permits for the mines during the first Trump administration in late 2019. Though they had the duty to consult with tribes impacted by the project, they only consulted 3 of the 28 tribes in Nevada, and many feel that those consultations were inadequate. Specifically, the BLM sent letters to 3 tribes when the tribal governments were shut down during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. For these reasons, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, the Burns Paiute Tribe and the Winnemucca Indian Colony, which ultimately lost, was appealed to the Ninth Circuit and lost there too. A second lawsuit was attempted in 2023.

Other kinds of resistance bloomed as well. The descendants of the Fort McDermitt, Paiute and Bannock tribal communities formed a group called People of Red Mountain, and began to organize in coalition with allies against the mines. They held events, ceremonies, rallies, educated their people, participated in legal challenges and used media and other methods to sway public opinion against the mine. Their slogans were "Life Over Lithium" and "You can't mine your way out of a climate crisis." In May of 2023, a different group of people formed a protest camp called the Ox Sam Camp to resist the mine on the ground, using their bodies to block bulldozers. In June 2023, Humboldt Co. Sheriff raided the camp and closed the area, preventing native protesters and their affiliates from entering.

Fighting False Solutions to Climate Change

A movement is forming to combat the slew of false climate change solutions that neoliberal Western companies are giving us. As fears of a warming world grow, and demands to get off fossil fuels increase, corporations create market based “solutions” such as carbon markets, nuclear energy, forest biomass (logging to burn trees in chip incinerators for energy for the grid), and hydrogen fuel. Lithium, being called ‘white gold’, is a current cornerstone of this new energy plan that People of Red Mountain calls “green colonialism”.

The Biden administration made a huge push for electric cars, setting a goal to make 50% of all new car sales electric by 2030. We have seen the fall from grace of the electric car in watching the Tesla story unfold. A car that gave people hope for a better world led to Elon Musk becoming the richest man on Earth, taking over the federal government, slashing funds for social services and unabashedly standing for white supremacy and corporate greed. Jindalee Lithium has collaborated with Tesla to “localize lithium supply” through planning these mines in the McDermitt Caldera’s close proximity to Tesla’s Nevada Gigafactory. Very little domestic lithium mining is currently happening in the US, and most is imported from Argentina, Chile, Russia and China. Musk has strong incentive to make lithium cheaper, and when Jindalee advertised this collaboration with Tesla to their investors, their stock went up 93%. Though Trump and Musk’s relationship is on the rocks, there is no doubt that Trump will push even harder than Biden for lithium in the coming years.

Lithium has woven itself into the bedrock of the militarized nationalism in other ways as well. Last year NATO released a statement of 12 critical raw materials that “are integral to the manufacture of advanced defense systems and equipment”. Lithium is #7. It is used for making the thermal batteries in missiles, submarines and torpedoes (missiles that launch out of submarines). NATO itself states that disruptions in these minerals’ supply could impact the production of essential

defense equipment. It is clear that stopping mining in the caldera could slow down military weapons production.

Indigenous people globally are standing up against false solutions. At this year's Public Interest Environmental Law Conference in Eugene, a panel about this struggle informed us that indigenous people from around the world go to the UN's Conference Of the Parties each year to push back on these false solutions. They speak out there about how their lands are being threatened for these destructive projects and directly confront the corporations that are there to promote themselves as the "green solution", and the politicians who are getting on board. We heard from People of Red Mountain about fighting lithium and folks from Pueblo Action Alliance about their successful campaigns to get New-Mexico to drop their plans to convert their grid to hydrogen fuel. Oregon has a long history of fighting dirty energy projects and winning. The message from the panel was clear – we will have to unite with the tribal communities affected by these mines to fight them, and we will have to change our lives and our societies radically to slow down climate change and survive.

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