

Environmental cleanup and critical minerals — both can happen in Idaho, now

The Stibnite Mining District of western Idaho contains mining claims that were worked sporadically from the 1890s until 1996 and abandoned long before environmental regulations were even a thought. Worse, no cleanup was ever conducted to eliminate the waste rock piles at each mine site — most of which are still exposed to the elements — leaving the district as a perpetual source of metal pollution.

In 2009 through 2013, Midas Gold Idaho assumed control of the abandoned mining claims, and for the past decade has been studying and conducting restoration work in the area. Despite never having actually mined anything onsite, on June 6 Midas received from the Nez Perce Tribe a notice of intent to sue within 60 days if the company does not reduce levels of metal contamination in the Salmon River tributaries upstream from the reservation and treaty fishing rights areas.

With all due respect to the intent of the lawsuit, the damage has already been done by others who are long gone — decades before Midas showed up. Now what?

Both parties agree that

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drinking water standards need to be vastly improved. Also, both parties have spent millions on restoring the district's environment. Midas Gold actually wants to take on the responsibility of more cleanup, and their plan is awaiting approval by Forest Service. Under the environmental law known as "CERCLA" (Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980), Midas is

permitted to evaluate and explore the site without being held legally responsible for the negative environmental effects of previous mining operations.

But rather than gloat in the law and sit on the claims, the company specifically volunteered to do badly needed reclamation in the district such as: restore 13 acres of abandoned mine site, plant 50,000 trees, upgrade sections of the road network

and report their restoration and study results to the Forest Service, the EPA, Idaho DEQ and the Nez Perce Tribe.

Midas' plan also would recover gold and badly needed antimony and other minerals left behind in the abandoned sites decades ago by processing waste rock, and by mining some existing sites in the district. This is good because the United States is heavily reliant on China for many critical minerals, some of which are abundant at Stibnite.

This proposed scenario appears to be a win-win for these Idaho abandoned mine lands and demonstrates that when environmental cleanup becomes profitable, a lot more of it will likely occur. The financial incentive to clean up someone else's decades-old environmental mining mess is also a blessing because it will also provide critical minerals for our economy and national defense.

Mining companies today are operating under

completely different and much stricter regulations. The Midas effort appears to be innovative, genuine and responsive to mining's past mistakes and holds promise of future environmental health, production of critical minerals, as well as much-needed tax revenue and jobs for western Idaho.

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Dr. Ned Mamula is a geologist who has worked on mining and mined land reclamation in the West. He is the author of the book "Groundbreaking! America's New Quest for Mineral Independence."



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