

Balancing America's environment, mining and the Green New Deal

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The proposed Green New Deal legislation incorporates lofty goals for converting our country's energy sources into renewables within a very short timeframe. Whether for or against those changes, one fact is certain: renewable energy and electric vehicles require minerals—lots of them.

Most of these minerals can be mined domestically by American workers following the most stringent environmental protection and worker health and safety regulations in the world. Good thing, because the Green New Deal will need lithium and cobalt for rechargeable and storage batteries, silver for solar panels, rare earths for wind turbines, nickel for smartphones and high tech alloys, gold for electronics and computer chips, and copper for electric vehicles - just to name a few. To advance the Green New Deal's objectives, these minerals must come from American mines to eliminate the unnecessary carbon footprint to transport foreign minerals to the U.S.

Unfortunately, over the years our policymakers have shunned America's mineral wealth, making it increasingly difficult to explore and develop these resources. Today, too much of our mineral-rich public lands are off limits to mining—and the rest is burdened by a protracted permitting process that chills investment in mineral exploration and development.

Forty years ago, both political parties wisely recognized the importance of producing domestic minerals and metals. In 1980, Congress passed the National Materials and Minerals Policy, Research and Development Act—referred to as the “Minerals Policy Act.” At the time, Democrats held a solid majority of both houses, and President Jimmy Carter signed the act into law.

The Minerals Policy Act clearly states we must simultaneously protect the environment *and* develop minerals:

The Federal Government, as a fundamental aspect of national minerals policy, must seek balance between the environmental, health and safety statutes and regulations...and the need to ensure the reliable availability of strategic and critical minerals.

In other words, the law mandates a *balance* between mining and the environment and directs the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to consider the vital importance of minerals and give *equal weight* to mineral production and environmental protection.

But somehow in the intervening four decades, the law's statutory requirements have been forgotten or ignored, as public land management has focused mainly on environmental preservation, making mineral exploration and development difficult if not impossible.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. is 100 percent import reliant on at least 21 critical minerals, and at least 50 percent import reliant on an additional 29. China, Russia or other geopolitical foes and unstable third-world nations have monopolies on producing many of these minerals. Most of these countries lack adequate environmental and safety regulations and some even mine using child labor.

Despite the technology explosion of the past 20 years, and tech's ever-increasing reliance on minerals, there is a growing disconnect between our mineral needs and boosting domestic production to meet these needs. Smartphones now use twice the number (from 30 to 60) of different metals and alloys than just a few years ago, making them lighter, brighter, faster, and better. Technological innovations continue to find new uses for minerals to build and improve communication and power networks, life-saving medical devices, electric vehicles, infrastructure, industrial production, conventional and renewable energy, and national security.

The modern mining industry has found the balance between mining and environmental protection that the Minerals Policy Act demands. Today's mines comply with stringent environmental standards using more green mining and environmental protection and reclamation technologies than ever before.

As policymakers consider any new legislation, including the Green New Deal, they must recognize that green objectives cannot be met without domestic mining. Fortunately, 40 years ago Congress presciently enacted a minerals policy to meet the nation's future need for minerals. Thanks to their vision, we already have a statutory mandate to develop the minerals for domestic consumption from American mines.

By complying with the Minerals Policy Act, the U.S. can once increase mineral production needed to reduce our current dangerous reliance on foreign minerals, become a dominant mineral producer once again, and show the world that mining, renewable energy and the Green New Deal must all go hand-in-hand.

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