



U.S. SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL

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Cantwell Committed to Reforming Outdated Mining Law

OLYMPIA, WA – As the U.S. Senate considers legislation to revise the Mining Law of 1872, a 135 year old law that governs mining on western public lands, today, Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) announced her commitment to meaningful reform of the law.

Senator Cantwell's office joined a group of stakeholders at an event in Olympia to reaffirm her position that any reform to the mining law needs to protect not only our economy, but our environment, and the public safety of our communities.

"If we don't have meaningful reform, many of America's most treasured places, including roadless areas, will continue to be claimed for mining" said Senator Cantwell. "The time has come to end the preferential treatment that hardrock mining receives under the 1872 Mining Law and to craft mining reform legislation that responsibly balances mineral development and the protection of our national treasures and western waters."

[A copy of her statement, as read by a member of her staff, is below]

February 7, 2007

"Thank you all for your support for updating the Mining Law of 1872. While efforts to comprehensively reform the Mining Law have been unsuccessful to date, I believe now is the time to seize the opportunity to achieve long-awaited reform.

"This 135 year old law remains a relic of Western expansion. It allows foreign and domestic mining companies to take minerals from federal lands without paying royalties, allows public land to be purchased at less than \$5 an acre, and has no environmental provisions for the protection of water supplies, wildlife, and landscapes. Last November, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation that would reform the Mining Law and provide for a program for the reclamation of abandoned hardrock mines. This year, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee is working on its own version.

"Reforming the antiquated mining law is critical to protecting our environment and our economy. I believe that any reform should include provisions to:

- Protect our nation's special places by increasing the amount of land that is off-limits to mining exploration and development to include roadless and wilderness study areas, areas of critical environmental concern, and lands in the Wild and Scenic River System;
- Prevent mine proposals that would unduly degrade public lands or resources ;
- Protect national parks and national monuments from adverse effects of large-scale mining operations;

- Allow state, local, and tribal governments to protect areas of environmental, cultural and religious significance from mining;
- Require industry to provide adequate financial assurances for land reclamation and water restoration; and
- Accelerate cleanup of abandoned mines by establishing an abandoned mine reclamation fund.

“While responsible mineral development is a legitimate use of our public lands, this outdated law allows mining in some of America’s most environmentally sensitive areas. In Washington, our public lands provide enormous economic and conservation benefits that increase the quality of life for all our citizens.

“If we don’t have meaningful reform, many of America’s most treasured places, including roadless areas, will continue to be claimed for mining. I have fought hard to preserve our nation’s roadless areas, and they are no place for a large-scale mining operation. Yet, there are almost 13,000 existing mining claims in these areas, including more than 400 in Washington.

“Under certain interpretations, mining is prioritized over all other land uses. This precludes responsible federal land management and prevents local communities from providing input on the impact mining may have on their quality of life.

“Just recently, a mining company has proposed a 3,000 acre open-pit mine near Mount St. Helens National Monument. This clearly would put this treasured, and historical, place at severe risk. Nearly 200,000 annual visitors enjoy hiking trails that provide breathtaking views of crystal clear lakes, pinnacle studded ridges and wildflower laden mountain slopes in the park’s backcountry. If approved, this mine could jeopardize critical scientific research, family recreational opportunities, threatened salmon and steelhead runs in the river, and municipal water supplies. Clearly, local citizens should have more of a say in the actual decision to open mining operations that affect their community.

“The legacy of this law can be seen throughout the West. More than 500,000 abandoned mines litter our public lands – including an estimated 3,800 abandoned mines in Washington. The price tag to clean up these abandoned mines is estimated at \$50 billion, and nearly 40 percent of western headwaters are contaminated by runoff from these abandoned mines. Many mining operations continue to leave a legacy of perpetual water pollution and the 1872 Mining Law contains no environmental or reclamation standards to deal with this issue. Vital waterways are polluted by these abandoned mines, and some of these sites now pose serious threats to the health and safety of communities downstream. While modern mines are required to post financial assurances for cleanup, existing mining laws do not specify how, or how much, a mine should be cleaned up. As the Senate undertakes comprehensive mining reform, these devastating loopholes must be closed.

“The time has come to end the preferential treatment that hardrock mining receives under the 1872 Mining Law and to craft mining reform legislation that responsibly balances mineral development while protecting iconic places and western waters. I look forward to working with you to pass legislation that manages our nation’s natural resources in an environmentally and fiscally responsible manner.”

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