

House holds oversight hearing on hardrock mining

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On July 20, the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources held an oversight hearing to discuss the future of hardrock mining in the United States. Streamlining the permitting process, royalties reform, and reclamation concerns were among the topics discussed at the hearing.

In his opening statement, Subcommittee Chairman Paul Gosar (R-AZ-4) expressed his support for domestic mineral exploration and reforms to the permitting and reclamation processes. Ranking Member Alan Lowenthal (D-CA-47) also highlighted the need for changes to hardrock mining reclamation programs, and advocated for a federal hardrock mining royalty program similar to those implemented for oil, gas, and coal.

The permitting process for hardrock mines can take anywhere from 1 month to 11 years, but averages around 2 years according to a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report from 2016. However, the process can take even longer; Mitchell Krebs, President and Chief Executive Officer of Coeur Mining, testified during the hearing that it took over 19 years to obtain proper permits at the federal, state, and local levels for the Kensington Gold Mine in Alaska.

While many states have royalty programs to mitigate the local impacts of mining, there is no federal royalty fee for hardrock mining on production from federal lands. Unlike coal mining and Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) reclamation, hardrock mining operations do not require a reclamation fee, and mining companies face significant liability when undertaking reclamation projects. Representative Doug Lamborn (R-CO-5) intends to introduce a bill which will include Good Samaritan legislation for hardrock mine cleanup.

Sources: E&E News, Government Accountability Office, U.S. House of Representatives
