

House Natural Resources hearing revisits U.S. dependence on foreign minerals

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The electronics and defense industries, among other key industries in the United States, rely upon the supply and availability of minerals – many of which are imported to the U.S. from other countries. Not only are these elements integral to the production of high-end electronics and advanced military technologies, but they also make up the foundation of many of our infrastructure projects. U.S. dependence on foreign sources for nonfuel mineral materials has more than doubled over the past 30 years. A recent U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) report revealed that the U.S. imported more than one-half of the apparent consumption of 50 nonfuel mineral commodities in 2016, and was 100 percent import-reliant for 20 of those. In 2016, China and Canada were the largest suppliers of nonfuel mineral commodities to the U.S.

On December 12, the House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources held an oversight hearing, “Examining Consequences of America’s Growing Dependence on Foreign Minerals,” to discuss reasons for the declining self-sufficiency of the United States for mineral commodities, and the consequences of relying on foreign sources for critical minerals. The hearing featured expert testimony from Ronnie Favors, Administrator at the Defense Logistics Agency and Strategic Minerals of the Department of Defense (DOD); Murray Hitzman, Associate Director for Energy and Minerals for the USGS; Richard Silberglitt, Senior Physical Scientist for the RAND Corporation; Kate Sweeny, Senior Vice President of Legal Affairs and General Counsel for the National Mining Association; and Carletta Tilousi, Council Member of the Havasupai Tribe.

At the hearing, witnesses addressed the concept of mineral “criticality” – determined by a number of factors for minerals that are essential in use, with limited or no viable substitute, and vulnerable to supply chain disruption – and the challenges associated with the U.S. mining regulatory system. Mr. Favors recognized that given recent mine closures, export restrictions, and volatility of the world market, there is a growing focus on decreasing import reliance and increasing domestic material production in the United States. However, according to Ms. Sweeny, mining in the U.S. is not appealing to private corporations because of the difficult and uncertain regulatory system. According to Dr. Hitzman, less than one-third of the United States has complete topographic, geologic, and geophysical 3D mapping coverage at the scale needed to inform mineral resource management. Increased domestic mining, particularly for uranium in the Grand Canyon was heavily criticized by Ms. Tilousi, due to perceived negative health and environmental impacts.

Sources: U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
