

A love of community and clean water is powering this grassroots campaign against mineral mining in the Black Hills.



South Dakotans are coming together to stop multinational mining companies from exploiting the lands, waters and people of the Black Hills.

The Black Hills Sports Show and Outdoor Expo in Rapid City, South Dakota is more than just the largest trade show for ATVs, boats, and hunting and fishing gear retailers in the region: it is a local celebration of the magnificence of the forests, lakes, and historic landmarks that make the isolated Black Hills mountain range so special. Amidst the hundreds of vendors that pack The Monument convention center each February for the three-day expo, few have become as much of a cultural fixture as the Black Hills Clean Water Alliance.

“We have a booth every year”, says the Alliance’s executive director Liliias Jarding, a veteran community organizer and South Dakotan of over twenty-five years. Jarding leads the organization’s efforts to safeguard the Black Hills’ natural resources, particularly drinking water, from industrial mineral mining. This is no easy feat: the region has long been a hotbed of mining activity for its rich deposits of uranium and gold, and in the past few years, multinational companies have also besieged the mountains with plans to mine other minerals, particularly lithium, rare earths, and graphite.

As of January 2025, there are 13,104 active mining claims in the Black Hills, comprising over 22% of the entire mountain range. This is a 3.5% increase in less than a year – if all of these claims were developed into mines, the demand for water to operate them would be astronomical: tens of billions of gallons would be diverted from the forest’s groundwater, lakes, and reservoirs every year, jeopardizing the drinking water supply of municipalities like Rapid City and military bases such as Ellsworth Air Force Base. The threat of widespread water contamination from mining pollution also looms large: there are more than 1,300 abandoned mines in the Black Hills, as well as the infamous Homestake Mine, which dumped 100 million tons of sediment pollution into Whitewood Creek for over a century. This waste traveled 175 miles downstream into the Cheyenne River, further contaminating waters already polluted by decades of uranium mining.

These data points, along with maps identifying new land tracts claimed by mining operations in the Black Hills each year, are central to the discussions that the Clean Water Alliance regularly has with the public - and the attendees of the Sports Show are no different.

“We always lead with the threats that mining poses to drinking water”, says Jarding. “Everyone needs clean water, no matter where they may stand on other issues.”

The Black Hills hold particular cultural and spiritual significance for Indigenous people, in particular the Lakota Sioux. The Lakota have lived in these mountains for millenia, revering every pebble of the 1.2 million acre range as sacred ceremonial grounds. “The Black Hills are central to the Lakota people’s origin story”, says Dov Korff-Korn, an attorney with the Lakota People’s Law Project. The mountain range’s namesake is derived from the Lakota words “Paha Sapa”, meaning “hills that are black”.

The Black Hills Clean Water Alliance, along with local Indigenous-led groups Lakota People’s Law Project and NDN Collective, have spearheaded the Save The Black Hills campaign: bringing together local ranchers, boaters, motorcyclists, tribal leaders, and elected officials working to protect the Black Hills from extractive mining activity.

The campaign is advocating for a permanent mineral withdrawal, which would prohibit mining throughout the federally-controlled lands of the entire range while preserving the public’s continued access to the land and water. Such a protection could be enacted by the Secretary of the Interior or by legislation passed by the U.S. Congress.

The coalition’s message is resonating with South Dakotans across political, ethnic, and generational lines. Jarding remembers a particular conversation with an attendee at this year’s Sports Show: a white man in his fifties wearing a hat bearing the words TRUMP in all capitals. He approached their booth, typically staffed by one white and one Indigenous individual wearing “Protect Water” t-shirts, and inquired about their work.

Jarding and her colleague presented him with the Clean Water Alliance’s latest claims map: the sea of black and grey squares showcasing the influx of corporate bids approved to rip through the Black Hills, extract its resources, and ship them out of state. They emphasized how a mineral withdrawal is essential to not only safeguard the supply of drinking water, but also to ensure the land remains safe and accessible for all South Dakotans: Indigenous and white, civilians and military members, ranchers and recreationists.

“He was surprised to learn about the extent of the activity and its impacts to the land and water”, Jarding recalls. “Afterward, he told us: ‘I’m glad you’re talking about this, I’m all with you. Keep doing what you’re doing.’”

Jarding recognizes that this reaction may sound surprising given the dominant political leanings of the state, but her decades of community organizing in both urban and rural environments has taught her never to allow these assumptions to stand in the way of an opportunity for constructive dialogue.

Korff-Korn agrees. “Our strength comes not from isolating ourselves from those that we have differences with”, he says. “Rather our strength comes from building connections, and therefore trust, over our shared concern for clean water and healthy communities”.

This grassroots coalition building is the underpinning of the Save the Black Hills campaign, which is steadily gaining greater public and political support. Still, Jarding is under no illusions about the challenges that lie ahead, recognizing the opposition from multinational mining corporations and their deep financial pockets.

“Ultimately, what keeps me hopeful is my stubbornness”, she laughs. “I believe the world can be a better place, and I’m going to be just as stubborn in protecting my community as the mining companies are in trying to exploit it.”