

**Other Voices**  
**Sol Henson**

Back to:  
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## **Proposed mine threatens wells stressed by drought**

With California in the midst of the worst drought on record, the proposal to reopen a historic gold mine in the heart of the San Juan Ridge could not come at a worse time.

The San Juan Ridge Mine would threaten local water supplies, the health of the Yuba River watershed, and the community and local economy that rely on them.

I was raised on the San Juan Ridge and attended Grizzly Hill School. I saw firsthand the impacts to my community the last time the mine operated in the 1990s. And as a scientist and hydrologist, I am deeply concerned that the proposed mine will again harm the place I call home.

While recent rains have mitigated some of this historic drought, last year was the driest year on record in most of California, reservoirs remain dangerously low, and on Jan. 30, the snowpack was just 12 percent of average.

In the face of such a crisis, the waste of billions of gallons of groundwater that the San Juan Ridge Mine would consume does not qualify as a best use of our county's water.

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At its peak, it's estimated the mine would pump up to 3.5 million gallons of water out of the ground every day — nearly one-third of the total daily groundwater use of all of Nevada County.

This discharge would impact the underground aquifer that provides water to hundreds of families, businesses and family-owned farms. This scale of water waste would be reckless and irresponsible.

The history of the mine illustrates the threat to local water supplies: on Labor Day weekend in 1995, the same mine struck a water-bearing fault, causing the failure of 12 domestic wells and the wells for the North Columbia Schoolhouse Cultural Center and Grizzly Hill School.

I was lucky, having graduated from Grizzly Hill School two years earlier. But those who came after me weren't so lucky, and students at the school drank bottled water for over a decade when a replacement well drilled by the mining company showed high levels of contamination. Some

residents with affected wells complained they became ill from drinking their water, and many whose wells were affected still need to filter or treat their water to this day.

Fast forward to the present day: data on the mine's potential impacts on local water supplies is being collected under drought conditions, raising concerns that inadequate science could determine the fate of our community and watershed.

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) to identify the potential impacts of the project. In order to produce an adequate EIR, significant monitoring of area wells needs to take place so that we can understand the current (or "baseline") water quality and levels of wells surrounding the mine. So far, however, mine proponents have committed to studying area wells for only a single year. Needless to say, one year of well data collected during a historic drought year does not amount to an adequate baseline study.

Without several years of monitoring, many doubt that an adequate EIR can be produced or that residents will have confidence in its findings.

The San Juan Ridge Taxpayers Association has asked the county to require multiple years of well monitoring in order to capture the seasonal fluctuations of well levels and water quality.

On Feb. 25 local organizations and community members will deliver to the Board of Supervisors more than 1,300 postcards signed by Nevada County residents and others concerned about the impacts of the San Juan Ridge Mine.

Before the supervisors' meeting, we will hold a rally at the Rood Center to express our concerns about this project.

Personally, I am not against mining — but I am very concerned that the San Juan Ridge Mine poses an unacceptable risk to our community and our irreplaceable water resources.

Please join us on Feb. 25 on the steps of the Rood Center at 8 a.m. and make your voice heard.

Sol Henson is a member of the San Juan Ridge Taxpayers Association the board of directors.