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Europe's green dilemma: Mining key minerals without destroying nature

Conservationists are spooked by Brussels' plans to ramp up mining of critical raw materials, but advocates say it's needed to hit the bloc's green goals.



Environmentalists and indigenous groups argue the existing red tape for extraction projects is a necessary safeguard | Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images

BY ANTONIA ZIMMERMANN

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For decades, the environmental and human cost of mining minerals like lithium and cobalt has largely been hidden from Europe's view. That's about to change.

As the EU looks to diversify its supply of critical raw materials away from China, it wants to make it easier to tap into domestic reserves of the minerals it needs to build green technology like wind turbines and solar panels.

But locals and green campaigners warn that slashing red tape for extraction projects risks taking a wrecking ball to decades of work to preserve nature and biodiversity, pointing out that mining can cause serious water and soil pollution and lead to deforestation and biodiversity loss.

In Tréguennec, a coastal area in Brittany in northwestern France, locals are living above what they say feels like a time bomb. Some 130 meters below their homes lies the country's second-largest deposit of lithium, a key component of the batteries used to power electric cars.

Mining that so-called "white gold" would involve digging up a protected nature reserve located on a migratory route for birds and destroying "something that took millions of years to create," said Philippe Spetz, a 69-year-old pensioner who lives in Tréguennec. "We will never get nature back," he warned.

No company has applied to extract the resource yet. At the time, Bérangère Abba, who was then France's junior minister for biodiversity, promised to "strike a balance" between protecting nature and mineral extraction. But locals and green groups worry the scales won't tip in their favor.

This clash between Europe's appetite for critical raw materials and its nature protection ambitions — already playing out across the Continent, with local protests against new mining projects in Portugal, Germany, Sweden and Spain — is only set to intensify after Brussels next week sets out new legislation to accelerate mining activities.

An undated draft of the rules, obtained by POLITICO, suggests the European Commission may allow strategic mining plans to be designated as so-called projects of overriding public interest, which would give them priority in the event of conflicts with other EU legislation, for example with species conservation law.

That echoes calls from industry groups, backed by liberal and conservative lawmakers, who argue that Europe can't boost its supplies of key minerals without softening stringent environmental requirements that make opening new mines a major bureaucratic headache.

“I think that the way that we mine in Europe is probably ... one of the best ones in the world. But we don't get permitted to do mining,” said Mikael Staffas, CEO and president of Swedish mining firm Boliden. He added that Europe “happily [imports] metals from other parts of the world” that mine with far lower environmental standards.

But environmentalists and indigenous groups argue that the EU's nature protection rules are a necessary safeguard, and that destroying local biodiversity in a quest to secure materials to become climate neutral would be counterproductive.

“We're talking about this green transition. For me, it's not green, it is black, because it's going to destroy the rest of the nature that we have left,” said Matti Blind Berg, who heads the National Confederation of the Swedish Sami. His community in the northern town of Kiruna has been fighting the expansion of the world's largest iron-ore mine, which he argues has displaced locals and threatens their ability to herd reindeer.

Faster drilling

Getting the green light for a new mining project in Europe can take up to 15 years — something the EU wants to fix in its Critical Raw Materials Act.

According to the draft, the Commission will allow mining projects designated as strategic to benefit from permitting deadlines of two years, with the aim of putting the bloc on track to lessen its dependency on imports more quickly.

While the EU can't supply all of the raw materials it needs, its most important lithium projects, for example, could satisfy 25 percent to 35 percent of Europe's demand by the end of the decade, according to Michael Schmidt, a research associate at the German Mineral Resources Agency. Currently, some 78 percent of the bloc's lithium comes from Chile.

Mining companies have long argued that permitting can only be sped up if the EU also agrees to relax some environmental rules.

The EU's water laws, for example, require companies to pass “very high thresholds,” such as “zero emissions to water,” which is “quite difficult to do,” said Kerstin Brinnen, legal counsel at LKAB, a government-owned Swedish mining company.

Mining projects in protected areas, while allowed, also need to undergo an additional impact assessment to show they won't harm the integrity of the site.

The industry has taken steps to minimize its environmental impact and compensate for damage to biodiversity, said Brinnen. But despite those efforts, “some kind of im

surrounding” area is “unavoidable.”

Treating mining activities as projects of overriding public interest would solve a number of those issues, she said. Industry bodies Eurometaux and Euromines have called for similar measures.

Because a majority of the bloc's known reserves of critical raw materials are located in or near protected areas, the EU will have to make concessions to nature protection if it wants to exploit them, industry leaders say.

“Mining cannot be moved,” said Boliden CEO Staffas. “So unless you're willing to kind of accept that, then the whole Critical Raw Materials Act will not really make any difference” because it won't in fact make it any easier to start new mining projects.

That argument is getting traction among some liberal and conservative lawmakers in the European Parliament.

“We keep expanding protected areas, and we can't afford that anymore right now,” said Hildegard Bentele, an MEP with the conservative European People's Party.

Speaking during a plenary debate last month, MEP Emma Wiesner of the Renew Europe group said: “We can't on the one hand say we want more raw materials and minerals. And then on the other hand, go regulate so it's impossible to open a new mine in Europe.”

DEPOSITS OF CRITICAL RAW MATERIALS IN EUROPE

With its Critical Raw Materials Act, the EU is aiming to boost its supplies of critical raw materials by making it easier for countries to mine domestic deposits.

The map below shows all occurrences of select critical raw materials* in Europe. Hover or tap on each dot to find out more.

Data as of September 2021.

*Borates, cobalt, germanium, graphite, lithium, magnesium, niobium, platinum group metals, rare earth elements, scandium, strontium.

SOURCE: European Geological Data Infrastructure

By Giovanna Coi

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Protecting biodiversity

Conservationists insist the EU's nature laws are there for a reason.

“Especially in light of the climate crisis and the high rate of biodiversity loss, the priority cannot simply be: more mining, more mining,” said Michael Reckordt, section head for raw materials at the NGO PowerShift.

Green groups have long fought against the expansion of mining in Europe, favoring efforts to reduce consumption and source raw materials through other means, including by recycling and developing alternative materials.

In light of Brussels' new plan, they're now calling for EU nature laws to be upheld.

“If mining was really green, then [following existing environmental] legislation shouldn't be an issue” for the industry, said Diego Marin, policy officer for raw materials and resource justice at the European Environmental Bureau, an NGO.

But campaigners are pessimistic about their concerns being heard. Their call for an explicit ban on mining activities in the bloc's Natura 2000 network of protected areas so far only has the backing of one group — the Greens.

NGOs lament that the Commission has tasked its internal market department, rather than the environment department, with leading work on its Critical Raw Materials Act.

“I would like to see much more engagement from DG Environment in this file,” said Marin. “For the time being they have let DG GROW pretty much just take it on.”

The fear is that the focus of the legislation will be on ramping up raw material supply at all costs, rather than limiting the impact of mining on the environment.

Asked about his department's input, Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius told POLITICO in a written statement he is "actively engaged in drafting the proposal" and primarily focused on ensuring that raw materials are recycled as much as possible — both to "secure the supply" and "save energy." The internal market department declined to comment.

NGOs and experts warn that the Commission is shooting itself in the foot if it ignores the environmental concerns being raised in places like Tréguennec, where residents have vowed

to protest any new mining projects, potentially derailing the EU's goals.

"I think we have to be looking much more squarely at the longer term impacts" of mining projects on communities, warned Julie Klinger, an assistant geography professor at the University of Delaware.

"If we don't actually take proper care at the outset, then this idea of Europe becoming a climate-neutral continent through provisioning its own critical raw materials is ... sort of doomed from the outset."

CORRECTION: This article has been updated to correct that Bérangère Abba is France's former junior minister for biodiversity.

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