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Arizona mine faces permitting and Trump tests

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A view of the Hermosa mine. Photo: Daniel Moore / Axios

PATAGONIA, Ariz. — A critical-minerals mine could serve as a national example of sustainability — if it can clear federal permitting and community engagement hurdles.

Why it matters: [South32's Hermosa mine](#) was the first mining project that the Biden administration [added](#) to a fast-track permitting program.

- It's a test for whether mining projects in the battery supply chain can escape the Trump administration's [deepening purge](#) of Biden-era energy funding.
- The Grand Canyon State is also a microcosm of larger debates in Congress and elsewhere over mining. Those debates have intensified in the race to compete with China and shore up defense supply chains.

The big picture: The \$2.2 billion mine in southern Arizona is positioned to produce two federally designated critical minerals: manganese and one of the largest untapped deposits of zinc.

- Although South32 has state permits to begin construction, it's applying for federal permits for expansion into the Coronado National Forest.
- The FAST-41 process estimates a two-year NEPA review concluding in 2026, with first production the following year. The draft environmental impact statement was [released](#) May 9.

Yes, but: A \$166 million grant that the Energy Department [awarded](#) to South32 is being examined as part of an agency-wide review of funding priorities.

- A South32 spokeswoman confirmed the company received a DOE questionnaire. She highlighted the significance of zinc and manganese to national security.

Zoom in: The 45,000-acre Hermosa site in the Patagonia Mountains was abuzz with activity during a tour for contractors and mining experts that Axios joined in late April.

- Company officials led the group to a lookout point with sweeping views of the entire operation, where construction is about 40% finished.
- Officials talked up the mine's relatively small footprint and efforts to reduce environmental impacts: plans to quickly recharge underground aquifers, to clean up old mine tailings scattered by legacy mines, and color palettes that mimic the natural scenery.
- The company is working with city and county officials on a Community Protections and Benefits Agreement that aims to provide investment for housing, education, social services, or other areas.

Zoom out: President Trump wants to [speed up permitting](#) for mines, including for Rio Tinto's Resolution Copper project in Arizona.

- The Supreme Court this week [rejected](#) a Native American group's appeal contending that project will destroy a sacred area.
- The DOE [has targeted](#) Biden-era requirements for community outreach and environmental justice considerations, while Democrats have warmed to the idea of some mining.

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- "Not every mine is the right mine, but not all mines are bad, either," Sen. Ruben Gallego told Axios.

Between the lines: Developing such mines "can't be forced journeys," said South32 Hermosa President Pat Risner, who spoke on the sidelines that week at the Society of Environmental Journalists conference in Tempe.

- "The municipalities need everyone to be heard, and there are diverse views," he said. "If it takes longer to get it right, then it'll take a little bit longer."

The other side: Some longtime residents and environmental groups worry about the mine's effects on animal and bird migratory paths and disruptions to the landscape and air quality.

- The mine has divided residents of Patagonia, a 19th-century mining town that's become an enclave for retirees, mountain bikers and nature-lovers.
- "Their definition of sustainability is woefully inadequate for this biologically diverse area," said Carolyn Shafer, mission coordinator for the Patagonia Area Resource Alliance.
- Shafer acknowledged that the company had incorporated some of residents' feedback into its mine design.

Our thought bubble: Like real estate, mining is about location, location, location.

- Each project will have a unique footprint, making it difficult to replicate South32's or predict the broader mining industry's success.

