

• Graphite One

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And all anybody cares about is the lowest price. The lowest price is the law. In the past couple of decades, we've shifted from that to a focus less on just value for money, but more on values—values such as ESG [environmental, social and governance], values such as human rights, values such as environment value, such as corruption, transparency, etc. values such as resilience of supply chains, values of national security and geopolitics.”

The second factor, Wood said, is the recent systemic shocks of events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which “brought home the issue of supply chains to the average voter for the first time.”

“Going into a supermarket and not being able to buy whatever you wanted was a huge psychological shock for many people,” he said.

Thirdly, Wood said the federal government, as well as state and local governments, have a new focus on the energy transition moving away from fossil fuels. “Some of our major automobile manufacturers are saying they’re going to go 100 percent electric by 2035,” he said. And the way many of those vehicles’ batteries are currently designed means they need minerals like graphite.

At one point, panelists were asked to name the one research question related to critical minerals that they would like to see tackled. Wood and the Department of Energy’s Arctic Energy Office Director Erin Whitney both emphasized the need for more research on how to power mines with greener energy sources. Meanwhile, Emily J. Holland, an assistant professor in strategic and operational research at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island, said she wanted more research on how to convince communities to get on board with domestic mining projects.

“Mining has very bad PR,” Holland said. “What we’ve seen is there is this obvious need to increase responsible mining in a variety of places. But if you poll people about their thoughts on mining, they don’t want it in their neighborhood. We’ve seen, particularly in Europe over the last decade, a host of projects just sitting there and stopping despite the promise of economic development and jobs. I would want to know, what would we have to communicate to communities to get them to view mining as greener or as going to build the community, or as working towards a larger project? Because I think we don’t have that sort of level of communication with the average public yet on why mining is so important, why it’s different than the mining of 30 years ago, why it might be a benefit to bring to their communities.”

Convincing the public

Public perception and outreach came up again the next day when Murkowski appeared for a short ad-

dress and a talk moderated by University of Alaska President Pat Pitney.

“We’ve got to build support from really a very broad constellation of stakeholders, not just the state and the boroughs and the communities and the local residents,” Murkowski said. “We’ve got half of the nation’s tribes. We’ve got hundreds of Alaska Native corporations who are key to these discussions. So it’s never simple up there. But that’s why we have to make the strongest case for our ability to lead on mineral development.”

Murkowski said she thought minerals could be Alaska’s “next Prudhoe.” But she also discussed the challenges ahead for creating that new industry. She said infrastructure needs—roads, ports and power generation—are often “part of the Achilles’ heel” for resource extraction projects in Alaska. She said the state’s workforce needs to be developed, too, so that Alaskans can benefit from the jobs offered by such projects. Murkowski added that changing the public perception of mining could help stoke more interest in those jobs locally. She said promoting that shift in public opinion would be as important as all the policy initiatives being rolled out to subsidize the industry.

“We’ve got to change this because we need to get the support for projects,” she said. “We need to get the support for subsidies and trade protections and whatever else is going to be necessary to a more robust U.S. supply chain.”

She acknowledged that Alaskans have been witness to bad practices in mining, where companies have failed to clean up and remediate their sites.

Concerns

The proposed mine is on state land, and public input on Graphite One’s work will become increasingly important, especially once the company starts applying for its environmental permits, the next step after the feasibility study is completed. However, tribes in the surrounding region have already raised concerns about how the proposed mine could affect salmon habitats and other subsistence resources that they have used for thousands of years.

The Native Village Traditional Councils of Teller, Brevig Mission and Mary’s Igloo have been working with the advocacy group Water Policy Consulting to collect flow data from streams near the mine and apply for the right to keep the average base flows in the streams. In May the Native Village of Teller applied for an instream flow reservation permits for Hot Springs Creek and the Native Village of Brevig Mission applied for one for Glacier Canyon Creek with Alaska’s Department of Natural Resources, or DNR. Graphite One has already been using water from these creeks to support

its operations, using a temporary water use authorization from DNR, but the company has yet to apply for water rights.

“Instream flow water reservation is the same thing as a water right, except with a water right, you are taking water out of a stream or river and with a flow reservation you’re keeping it in, so it’s specifically for the protection of fish habitat,” said Hal Shepherd of Water Policy Consulting. Shepherd said the process to obtain such a reservation is rigorous, requiring a long record of data. Another complication is that the state often requires the tribes to waive sovereign immunity to obtain the reservation, Shepherd said.

“The state is concerned about it, because if they get sued, when they start an adjudication, then they need to be able to bring the tribe in as a party, because they’re the ones applying for the water reservation,” Shepherd said.

If that effort is successful, instream flow reservations would protect the water from being used by mining operations.

“Once you get the reservation, then you have a priority date of the day that application was submitted, and therefore a mining company can’t come along and take that water after your priority date,” Shepherd said.

Shepherd recalled that Graphite

One seemed like a small operation when he first began working with the tribes more than a decade ago.

“They were trying to find money to continue their investigating and exploration, and it didn’t look like they were going to get it,” he said.

“Now we get this news that they’ve just gotten \$37.5. They’re expanding all the time. They’re probably unique in Alaska for being, I would say, one of the biggest poster children for critical minerals.”



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