Centennial Mine

The presence of phosphate in the Centennial Range of Montana and Idaho has been known for many years (Condit and others, 1928). However, it wasn't until the summer of 1950 that mining interest was expressed after three geologists from the USGS mapped the phosphate deposits in detail and made the information available to the public (Honkala, 1953). The newly generated information concerning the phosphate deposits of this area created a small bit of competition between the J. R. Simplot Company and the San Francisco Chemical Company for the phosphate in the area, but the Simplot Company prevailed. The J. R. Simplot Company made an application for a federal non-competitive lease for lands on the southwest slope of Taylor Mountain, a prominent peak in the Centennial Range. That lease (I-02400) was issued to the Company on August 1, 1953. Based on the success of obtaining that lease, the Simplot Company applied for a federal non-competitive lease on additional lands adjacent to their phosphate lease. This application was rejected because, by now, the existence of the phosphate was well known and was only available by competitive leasing. A lease sale for those lands was held on May 12 1954, and the Simplot Company was the successful bidder. A lease (I-05379) was issued October 1, 1954. All in all, the J. R. Simplot Company came to hold three federal phosphate leases in this area, including one on the Montana side of the Range (MT-012510) (Figure 124).

Exploration on the leases was conducted during 1953 and 1954 and was essentially completed in October of 1955. The exploration consisted of detailed geologic studies, trenching, core drilling, and core analyses. Approximately 15 trenches were put in to uncover the phosphate ore. Discovered ore was classified as either underground ore or open pit ore. An access road to the leases were built during the fall of 1955 to Odell Creek, a distance of about 7 miles.

The mining season for the Centennial Range deposits was very short, generally from July 1 to October 1, due to the high altitude (from 8,000 to over 9,000 feet). The areal extent of the phosphate ore was divided into five mining areas. Only Areas 2, 4, and 5 were mined. The first mining activity started with the stripping of the overburden in Area 2, Block 1 on June 16, 1956, with actual mining and trucking of ore starting July 24, 1956. McDowell (1955) reported that operations at the mine had begun. At that time, the mine equipment consisted of two D-9 Caterpillar bulldozers, two carryalls, and one 1-yard shovel (Figure 125). The produced ore was shipped to fertilizer plants in Alberta, Canada. Area 2, Block 2, on "Goose Pimple Ridge" was mined between October, 1956 and August, 1957. Area 5 (MT-012510) was also mined at about this same time. The last area to be mined was the easternmost Area 4, with overburden removal and mining starting August 27, 1957. McDowell (1957) reported that all of the operations in 1957 were open pit with surface mining and development only.

An improved haul road to the railhead at Monida, Montana was built from June 1 to June 19, 1957. Ore was shipped by truck 37 miles to the railroad at Monida. Construction of an ore crushing and loading facility at Monida was started on March 8, 1957 and was completed June 1, 1957 (Figure 126).

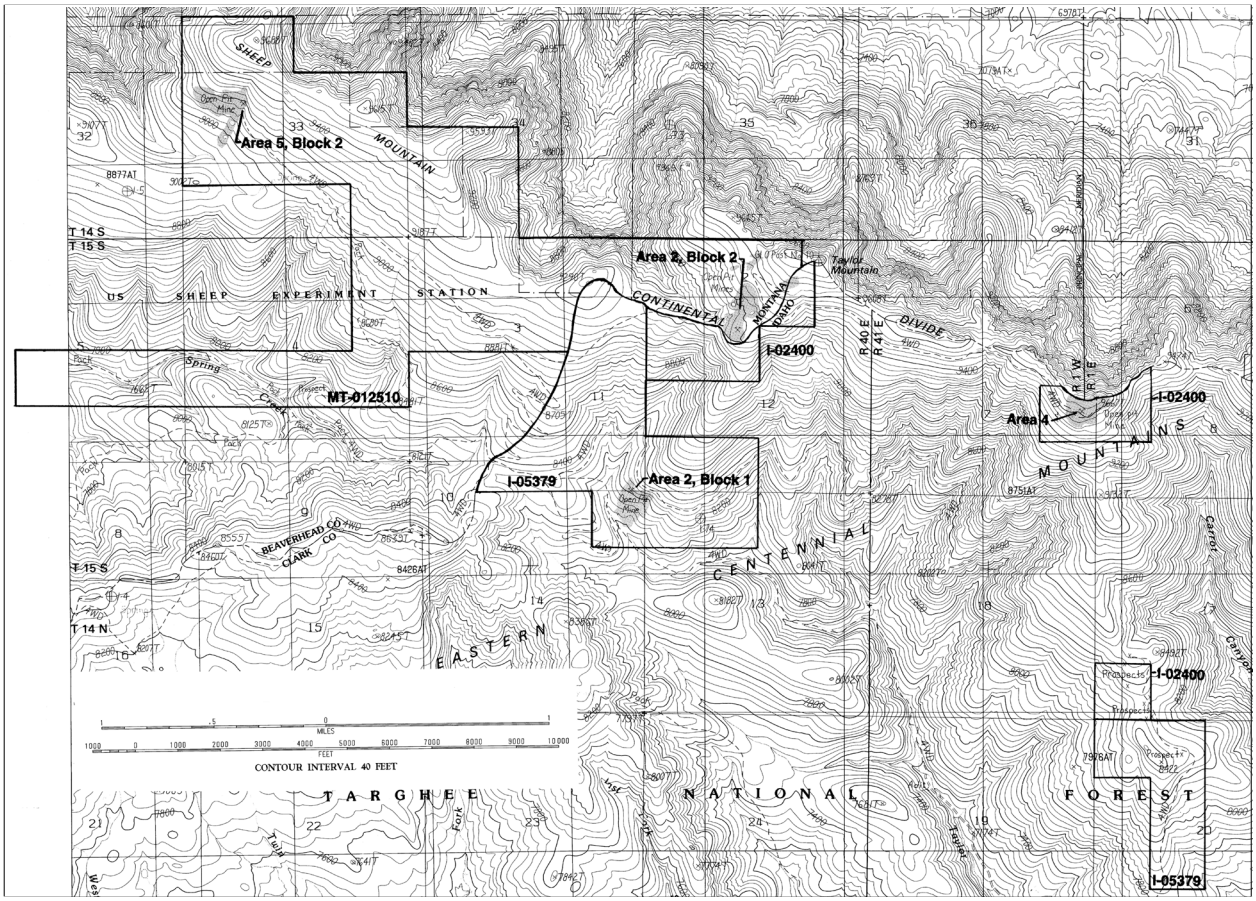

Figure 124. Map showing the location of the Centennial Mine, Clark County, Idaho and Beaverhead County, Montana.

While the bulldozers and shovels were busy moving ore, the leases themselves were undergoing change. Business decisions within the J. R. Simplot Company were being made. The two Idaho leases (I-02400 and I-05379) were assigned from the J. R. Simplot Company to The Ruby Company on July 1, 1956. The Ruby Company was a wholly owned subsidiary of the J. R. Simplot Company. These leases were later assigned to the Bannock Chemical Company (June 1, 1966), another wholly owned subsidiary of the J. R. Simplot Company. The leases were finally assigned back to the Simplot Company for good on February 1, 1983.

The last reported production from the Centennial Mine was in 1958. Early in 1959, a decision was made to close the mine. At the time of closure, the mining equipment on site consisted of one 1-yd Northwest diesel shovel, one 3/4-yd Northwest diesel shovel, three D-9 Cats, two D-8 Cats, 2 Cat patrols, one portadrill (Figure 127), one payloader, one Euclid water truck, and six pickup trucks. There were 28 men employed in the mine and the loading facility. Open pit reserves had been essentially mined out, leaving only the underground reserves. Underground operations were not

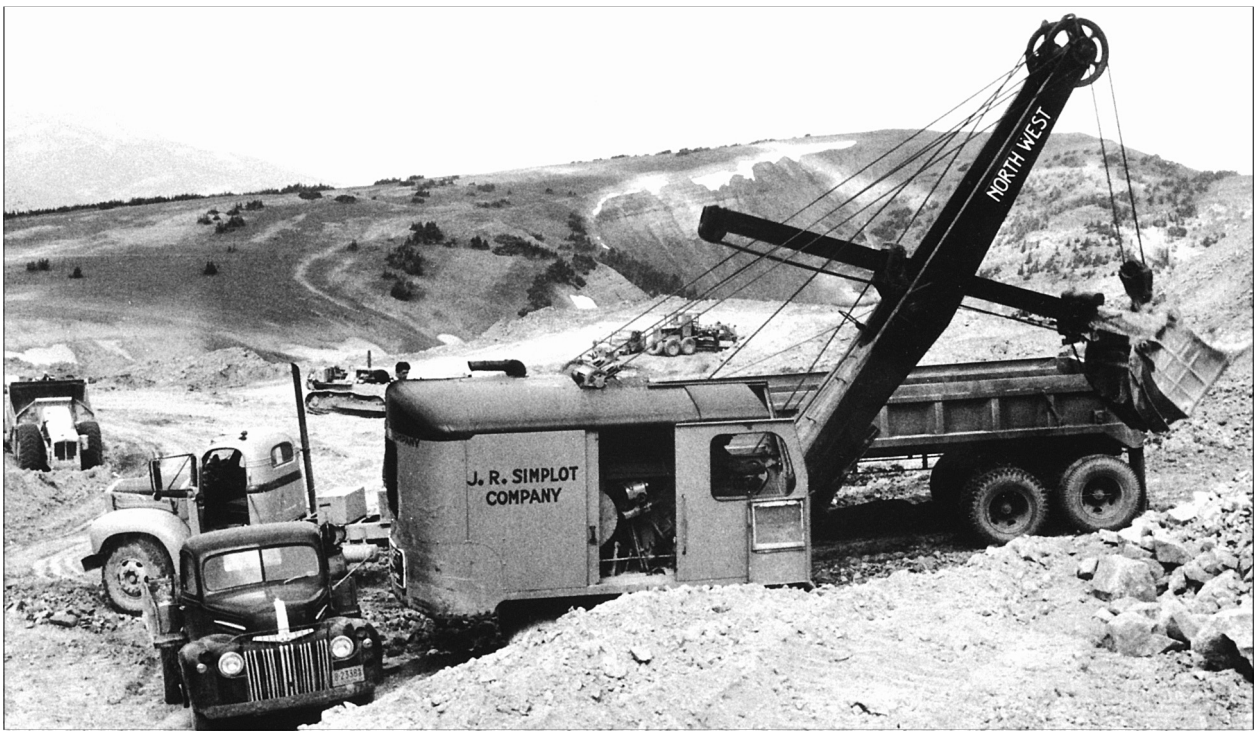

Figure 125. Centennial Mine, September 23, 1957. BLM file photo.

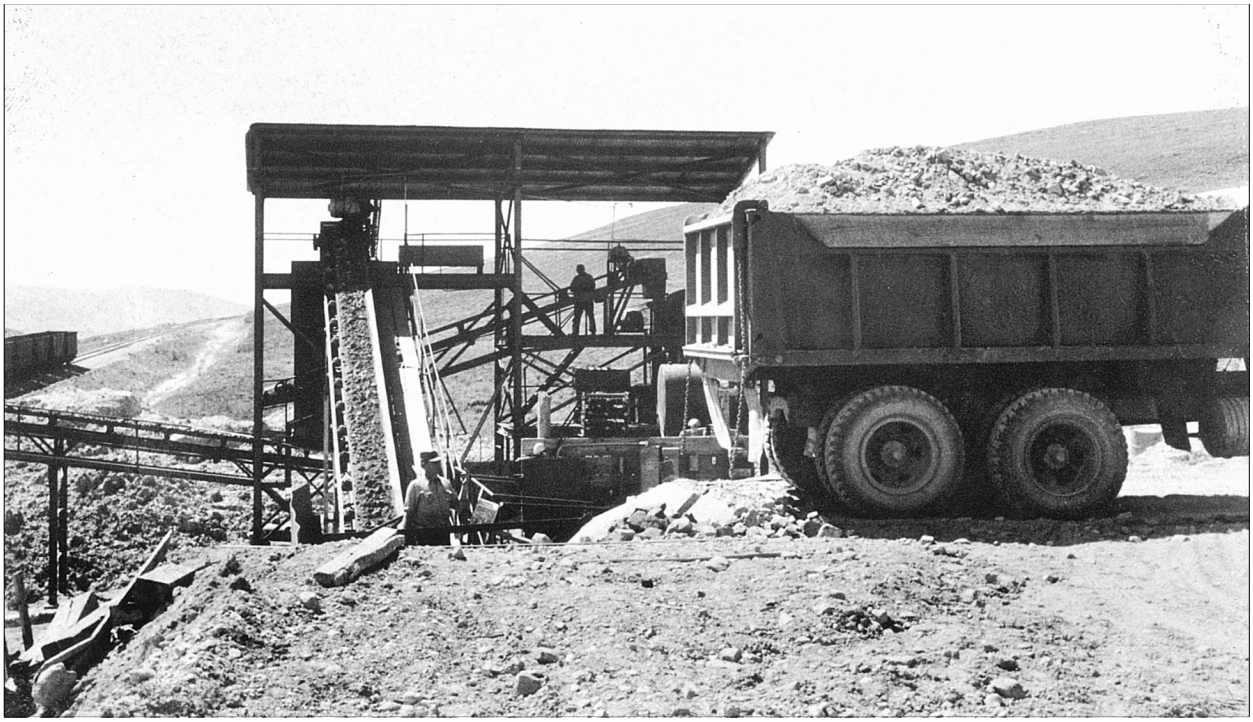

Figure 126. Loading Centennial Mine phosphate ore at Monida, Montana, September 23, 1957. BLM file photo.

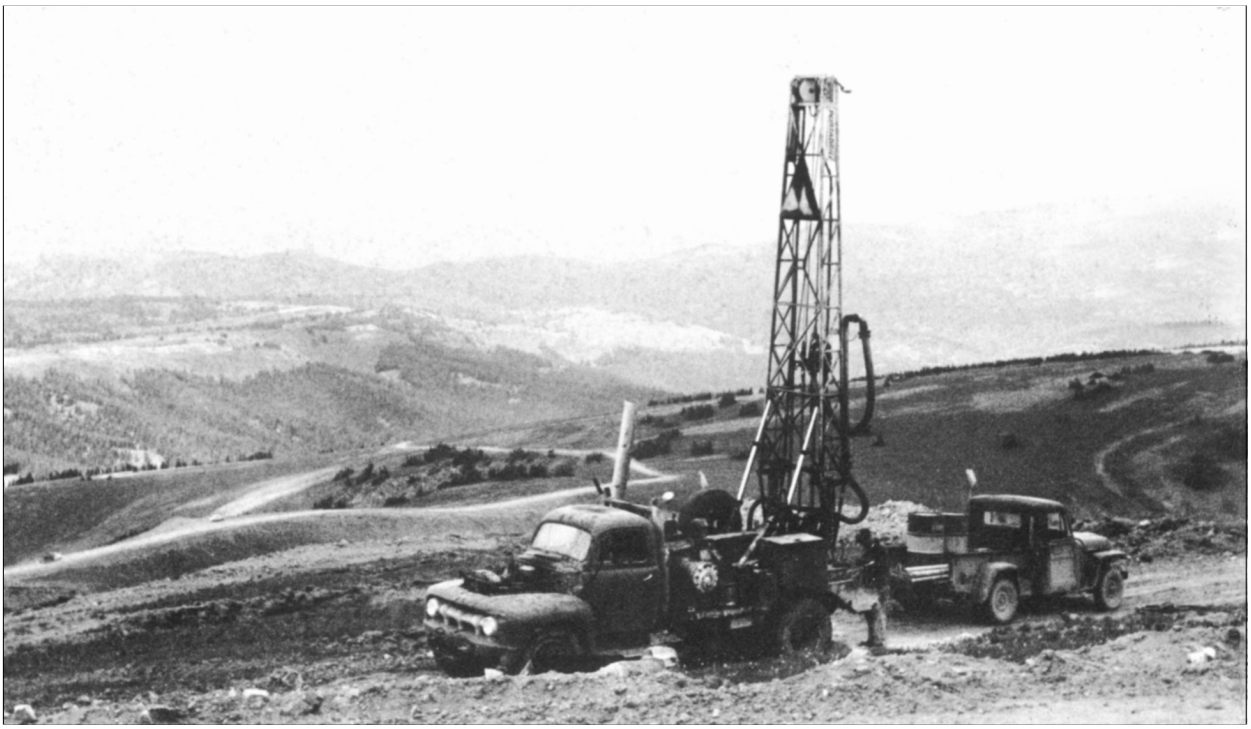

Figure 127. Drilling rig, Centennial Mine, September 23, 1957. BLM file photo.

economically justified at that time and current market constraints worked against continuing the mine. Fletcher (1959) made the first report that the property was idle.

Reclamation was started shortly after the mine closure and was completed during the mid-1960's. There was a brief episode of underground reserve exploration in 1960. Some 40 drill holes were put down on both Idaho leases for a total of 1,417 feet. There was also extensive erosion control work conducted. The leases remain idle as of this writing, waiting until underground mining of phosphate becomes a viable business venture. The J. R. Simplot Company remains the Federal lessee of record.