Mountain Fuel Mine
(Upper Dry Valley Mine)

The Mountain Fuel Mine (sometimes referred to as the Upper Dry Valley Mine) is located in T. 9 S., R. 44 E., Sections 14, 15, 23, 24, 25, and 26 (Figure 139). The mine extends for over three miles in length and is located on Federal Lease I-012989.

The presence of phosphate ore in the immediate vicinity of the Mountain Fuel Mine has been known since the early twentieth century. In July, 1911, the USGS excavated an exploration trench in the NW¼NE¼ of Section 16, T. 9 S., R. 44 E., about 1½ miles west of the mine site. This hand-dug trench was 450 feet long and 10 feet deep and explored the phosphate ore zone (Mansfield, 1927, p. 260). There was no further known phosphate exploration in this area until September and October, 1947, when the USGS initiated a new round of exploration. The USGS excavated two bulldozer trenches in the NW¼SE¼ of Section 14, T. 9 S., R. 44 E., on the west limb of the Schmid syncline (McKelvey, Armstrong, Gulbrandsen, and Campbell, 1953, p. 38). This location placed the trenches directly in the area of the future open pit (see Figure 139). By December, 1961, this trench caved and the exposed beds were indescribable.

Interest in developing and mining the phosphate ore in this area started in 1961. An application for a Federal lease was filed by Wells Cargo Inc. on November 20, 1961, but was rejected one week later on the 28th because of insufficient information. The Wells Cargo company resubmitted the competitive lease application on December 26, 1961, modified the application on January 26, 1962 and again on March 14, 1962. Due to business reasons, the Wells Cargo company withdrew their application for the competitive lease on July 31, 1962.

The BLM held a competitive lease sale for this area on August 23, 1962, even though the requester had withdrawn their application. There were two bidders at the lease sale, the Monsanto Company and a partnership of John D. Archer and William J. Colman. Sealed bids were opened for the Federal phosphate lease I-012989. J. D. Archer and W. J. Colman were recognized as the high bidders; thus securing the rights of the lease. The lease was issued jointly to them on November 1, 1962, covering 560 acres.

Considerable work was expended on the lease from the winter of 1962 through 1963. Four trenches and several drill holes were put in by the Mountain Fuel Supply Company on the northern portion of the lease. On April 1, 1963, W. J. Colman assigned his portion of the lease to J. D. Archer, and on the same date, Archer assigned the entire lease to the Mountain Fuel Supply Company, retaining a 15 cents/ton overriding royalty.

Exploration by drilling and trenching continued during the period from Spring, 1963 through Spring, 1967. There were 50 drill holes put down totaling 8,750 feet in the northern portion of the lease during

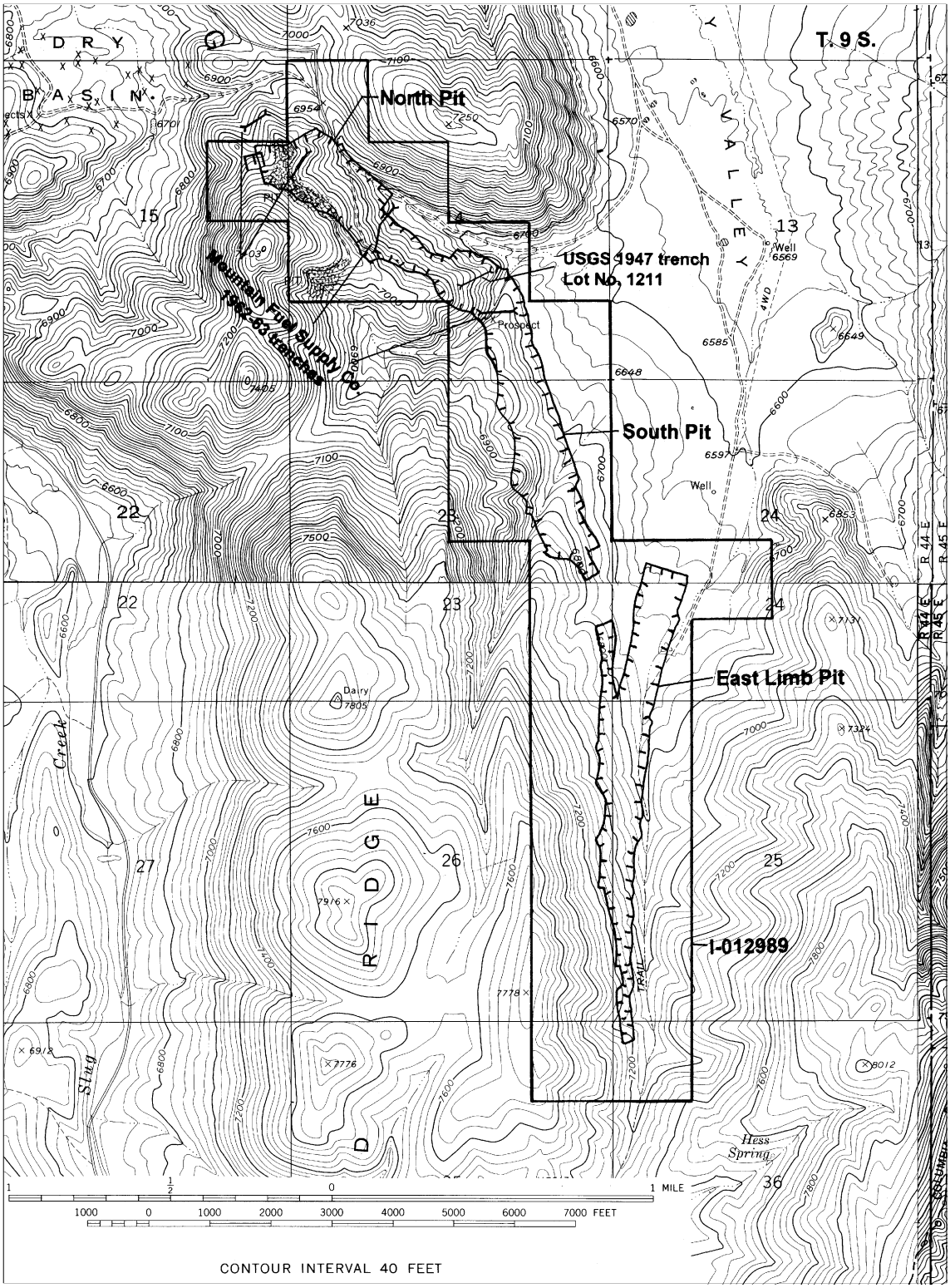

Figure 139. Map showing the location of the Mountain Fuel Mine, Caribou County, Idaho.

1963, with another 48 drill holes in the same area totaling 7,200 feet in 1966. There were 90 drill holes emplaced in the southern part of the lease in 1966 that totaled 18,400 feet.

During late 1966 and early 1967, Mountain Fuel Supply Company, and their operator, Wells Cargo, Inc., commenced the opening of a mine. This initial work consisted of stripping approximately 1,000,000 tons of overburden from the ore zone, roughing in access roads, and clearing vegetation. By April, 1967, bulldozers and scrapers had removed a considerable amount of overburden, and the construction of the haul road (utilizing the stripped overburden) from the area of the pit to the lease boundary was well underway (Figure 140). The initial plan called for mining ore starting in the summer of 1967, with an open pit about 2,400 feet long, 1,100 feet wide and 150 feet deep.

Figure 140. Area of the Mountain Fuel Mine, view north, 1974. BLM file photo.

Concurrent with the exploration on this lease during 1965-66, Mountain Fuel Supply Company was constructing a beneficiation plant, called the C. F. White Plant, near Conda, Idaho, adjacent to a similar plant owned by the El Paso Products Company. This plant was to beneficiate the ore from their mine and the processed material was to be sold to fertilizer manufacturers in the western States and Canada (Hansen, 1968; Hansen, 1970; Service, 1967). Prior to ore being delivered from the mine, the plant utilized purchased phosphate rock.

Due to business reasons internal to the company, Mountain Fuel Supply Company suspended operations at the minesite on July 7, 1967. At the same time, the beneficiation plant was shut down. No phosphate ore had been mined, removed or beneficiated.

Mining activities on Federal lease I-012989 languished from the summer, 1967 until about 1981. During that period of time, the major event was the assigning of the lease from Mountain Fuel Supply Company to Beker Industries, Inc. on June 1, 1977. Beker Industries then assigned 50% of the lease to Western Co-operative Fertilizers (US) Inc. on January 1, 1979. Also on January 1, 1979, Beker Industries, Inc. and Western Co-operative Fertilizers (US) Inc. formed a partnership entitled Conda Partnership and the Federal lease was assigned to the Partnership.

Conda Partnership initiated exploration activities on the lease in late 1981. By the end of 1982, the Partnership had drilled 111 holes utilizing a 5-inch rotary drill and reverse circulation. Exploration continued throughout 1983 and 1984 and by the end of 1984, there were 42 additional drill holes totaling 6,765 feet, and 14 trenches had been excavated. Also during this time, Conda Partnership extended the railroad line from their now closed Champ Mine, and relocated the Champ loadout tipple to the Mountain Fuel Mine site (Figure 141).

The Mountain Fuel Mine began ore production in late 1985. All of the phosphate ore produced at the mine was sent to supply the Partnership's C. F. White Plant at Conda, Idaho. The Conda Mining Division of Washington Construction Company was designated as the operator of the mine. Mining was an open pit operation using 16-yard electric shovels and 120-ton Lectra Haul trucks. Development and mining moved from the northern part of the lease to the south. Mining continued into 1986 until in May of that year, Beker Industries, Inc., one of the Conda Partners, declared bankruptcy. At that time, the Mountain Fuel Mine and the C. F. White Plant were shut down.

The C. F. White Plant was bought by a newly formed fertilizer company called Nu-West Industries and was opened in the summer of 1987. The Conda Partnership also reopened the Mountain Fuel Mine to supply the plant under contract. Exploration in the southern part of the lease indicated that there was additional ore to be leased and the Partnership was granted lease modifications on October 1, 1989, May 1, 1990, June 1, 1991, and October 1, 1991, bringing the total acreage of the lease to 1,120 acres. As the open pit progressed southward, reclamation was initiated to backfill the northern portions of the pit (Figure 142).

Figure 141. Mountain Fuel Mine tipple, May 3, 1995. Photo by the author.

Figure 142. Mountain Fuel Mine, view south, October 10, 1991. Photo by Peter Oberlindacher, BLM.

The Mountain Fuel Mine continued operations into 1993 at an annual production rate of approximately 1.6 to 1.7 million tons of phosphate rock. During the latter part of 1993, all of the economically valuable ore in the mine was extracted and in November, 1993, Conda Partnership closed production at the mine and initiated final reclamation (Figure 143). On June 1, 1995, the lease was assigned to Nu-West Mining, Inc., the parent company of Nu-West Industries, Inc.

Figure 143. Reclaimed Mountain Fuel Mine, June 27, 1996. Photo by the author.