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## Finding common ground to protect freshwater resources

Beneath the lovely lakes and lush woods of northern Minnesota lies the Duluth Complex, one of the world's largest deposits of copper and nickel. A controversial proposal in 2006 to tap those deposits stoked a unique collaboration of local and regional groups that today continues to bring scientific rigor and community engagement to the public debate over mining.

As details emerged in 2008 of plans by Toronto-based PolyMet Mining Corporation to dig an open-pit mine in the headwaters of Minnesota's St. Louis River, environmental advocates, outdoor enthusiasts, members of area Native American tribes, and others began expressing concern. The headwaters feed the Lake Superior basin and are key to the region's freshwater resources.



The region's waterways, such as Minnesota's St. Louis River, are key to the health of the Lake Superior basin.

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Critics noted the acidic drainage known to come from such copper and nickel mines — often referred to as “sulfide mines” because of the high sulfide content of the rock — could be environmentally devastating to the basin's ecosystem and damage the area's vibrant tourism industry. Concern also arose that the project could violate the treaty rights of local Native American communities whose members fish and hunt in the area.

A key challenge for the diverse groups was finding common ground to approach the problem, explained Steve Morse, executive director of the [Minnesota Environmental Partnership](#), a statewide umbrella organization whose members range from

major national organizations to small grassroots groups. The Partnership is one of several Mott Foundation grantees working on environmental issues in Minnesota.

Morse said that, while some groups were strident in voicing their opposition to sulfide mining, the mining industry's longtime economic role in Minnesota prompted caution by others. Because the groups soon recognized the need to develop a shared vision and the value of doing so, the Partnership created what it called a "mining cluster" to facilitate the process. Morse noted that helping participants find ways to effectively work together while maintaining their individual voices was key.

"It helps to differentiate between the things we agree on, the things we are collaborating on and where we're just sharing information," he said. "So everybody does not need to agree on everything in order to work together. Sharing and communication, where people don't have to absolutely march lockstep, is really important."

Scott Strand, executive director at the [Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy](#), echoed that view. The Center, also a Mott grantee, is partnering with other groups in the state to provide public education and outreach on issues related to sulfide mining. Strand noted that the participating organizations complement each other because they fill different niches, from conducting legal and scientific activities to working with policymakers and grassroots audiences.

"You can't get it done with just legal and scientific tools," he said. "You need a combination of all these things."

Highlighting those unique contributions is the [Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission](#), which represents 11 Ojibwe tribes that retain legal rights to hunt and fish in designated areas of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota. The Commission conducts scientific research and disseminates findings on the proliferation of wild rice plants, the health of fish populations and movement of wildlife around the region. Such information has proved helpful to tribes, communities and sportsmen's groups interested in protecting natural areas in Minnesota.

"One of our critiques [of the Duluth Complex proposal] is insufficient baseline data to adequately characterize the site," says Ann McCammon-Stolis, the Commission's director of intergovernmental affairs. "If we are going to be critical for that reason, we should also be helping to provide that data."

The groups believe their collaboration has helped set records for public engagement around environmental issues in Minnesota. For example, the required 90-day public comment period for the Duluth Complex proposal's first environmental impact statement in 2009 generated about 3,800 comments from residents, setting a new state record for the number of public comments on an environmental proceeding. After being directed by the Environmental Protection Agency to reevaluate its initial findings, PolyMet's second environmental impact statement in 2013 sparked more than 52,000 comments, with the vast majority raising concerns about the project.

The environmental community's collaborative efforts and advocacy, as well as the resulting media attention, undoubtedly played a major role in the high number of comments, said Morse.

The significant public response is credited with leading to changes in PolyMet's proposal, including the use of improved water treatment technology. The groups also have pressed federal leaders for a study on the cumulative impacts of mining in the Great Lakes basin and have called on the state government to conduct a comprehensive study on the possible health effects of sulfide mining. While such studies have yet to be undertaken, the groups' efforts are credited with helping to raise awareness of the issue among the public, legislators and government officials.

With the Duluth Complex project still under consideration, it remains to be seen how the sulfide mining story will play out in Minnesota. However, the groups engaged around the issue say their collaborative work will continue to ensure that the public is informed and that policymakers have the facts and understand public opinion.

Many participants in the mining cluster agree that the collaborative process and resulting relationships helped them develop a vital sense of trust and likely will be central to other partnerships on issues such as the environment, human health and tribal rights. The groundbreaking collaboration also could inform how others might address similar concerns regarding proposed mines in the Great Lakes region and elsewhere.

"It's too early to know whether we will be successful in protecting the water from sulfide mining pollution," said Paula Maccabee, a lawyer with WaterLegacy, a nonprofit advocacy group assisting the Partnership with outreach and engagement activities related to water quality in the Great Lakes Basin. "But it's already clear our degree of unity and cohesion in collaboration has changed the discussion."

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