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Groups want health risk study of PolyMet

By [John Myers](#) on Oct 20, 2014 at 8:18 p.m.

More medical groups have joined in asking for a human health risk assessment of the proposed PolyMet copper mine project near Hoyt Lakes.

On Monday, officials from the Minnesota Public Health Association, Minnesota Medical Association, Minnesota Citizens Federation Northeast, Healthy Food Action and Food and Water Watch Midwest Region called for state and federal regulatory agencies to look at how the mine might impact human health.

They've sent letters to Gov. Mark Dayton asking for the formal health study because of the potential of PolyMet copper mining and processing to increase mercury in fish, contaminate drinking water in the region and expose workers and residents to unhealthy air.

"A health risk assessment and health impact assessment of sulfide mining is a reasonable step to take to protect the future health of Minnesotans. The MMA urges your support," Dr. Donald Jacobs, president of the Minnesota Medical Association, wrote in a recent letter to the governor.

The groups want the Minnesota Department of Health to conduct the review, saying none of the human health issues has been vetted in the ongoing environmental impact statement that has focused on how Minnesota's first copper mine might impact air and water quality, wildlife and other natural resources.

Copper mining "is not only an environmental issue. It is a public health issue,"

said Kathleen Schuler, a member of the Minnesota Public Health Association Policy Committee, in announcing the request. “We can’t afford additional mercury affecting babies and children in Minnesota. Mercury is a potent neurotoxin and 1 out of 10 infants in our Lake Superior Region are already born with unsafe levels of mercury in their blood.”

The News Tribune first reported in February about a group of 19 Duluth-area physicians, nurses and medical school faculty who sent letters to state and federal regulatory agencies saying the effects of copper mining on human health haven’t been adequately addressed.

The group said the environmental review, which remains underway, fails to define the human health effects of increased mercury emissions, exposure to asbestos-like mineral fibers and arsenic.

“The World Health Organization lists 10 chemicals of major public health concern. Sulfide (copper) mining involves five of them, including mercury, arsenic, lead, asbestos and air pollution,” the group wrote.

“This has expanded from a few doctors and health care professionals around Duluth to really a statewide concern among the medical community,” said Paula Maccabee, attorney for the group Water Legacy and a vocal critic of the PolyMet project.

Bruce Richardson, PolyMet vice president of corporate communications and external affairs, noted Monday that a similar request by a few medical professionals was made before the public comment period on the environmental review closed earlier this year. He said the time to raise the issue has now passed.

“To try and work it outside the process is neither appropriate nor productive,” Richardson said. The environmental impact statement “thoroughly addresses health-related impacts of the project.”

Maccabee said there is precedent for conducting a health risk assessment as part of the current environmental impact statement. State officials expect that process to be finished by spring, although adding the health assessment at this point likely would delay that completion date.

In addition, Maccabee said a separate health impact assessment should be conducted to look at the project's impact on workers and nearby residents. That study would be separate from the environmental review "but would have to be done before any permits are issued," Maccabee said.

PolyMet plans a \$600 million open-pit mine and processing center near Hoyt Lakes, employing 300 people for 20 years or more, mining and processing copper, nickel, platinum, palladium and possibly other valuable metals.

Supporters say the project can be done without long-term harm to the environment, providing an economic boost to the regional economy.

Critics say the long-term potential for acidic runoff from copper-bearing rock, and other potential water pollution problems, isn't worth the relatively short-term jobs created.

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