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Nolan's talk is cheap

Congressman misleads his constituents on merits of copper mining near BWCAW

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In a recent op-ed in the StarTribune, Eighth District Congressman Rick Nolan made a double-barreled argument in favor of copper-nickel mining on the edge of the Boundary Waters. In both cases, the Congressman shot wide.

Nolan's contention that mining in the region is critical to advancing a green economy is simply disingenuous. If the Congressman has researched the topic at all, he knows that copper is found in abundance throughout the world. According to the pro-industry Copper Development Association, known copper reserves globally total nearly 5.8 trillion pounds and throughout all of human history we have mined just 12 percent of that total. Whether the low-grade sulfide ore found in northeastern Minnesota is mined or not will have no detectable effect on the availability of copper in the global market, which is where any copper mined in Minnesota would be headed.

In either case, mining these days merely fills the gap between the metals we use and the amount we recycle. Nearly 50 percent of copper is already recycled in the U.S. and there's room to do even more. That's the way to advance a truly green economy—not consuming huge amounts of carbon-based energy to extract and process low-grade ore from a highly sensitive environment that will require pollution mitigation for centuries.

As for his second argument—that we should mine here because we have the toughest environmental laws—it's hard to believe the Congressman can make this claim with a straight face. Rep. Nolan is well aware of the political power of the mining industry in Minnesota, which has prevented clean-up of mining pollution on the Iron Range for decades, despite federal and tribal pressure and litigation from environmental groups. The only reason conditions aren't far worse is that the waste rock that forms manmade mountain ranges from Coleraine to Babbitt is relatively benign. The same can't be said for the waste that would be left behind from the mining of vast amounts of sulfide ore for the copper, nickel, and precious metals it contains.

Past Legislatures may have passed strong environmental laws, but they do little good when the politicians of today continuously seek to weaken them, or block enforcement. Rep. Nolan should understand this, since he's one of the politicians seeking to undermine those protections in federal law.

Regardless, in the end, the laws of men only go so far. It's the laws of physics that govern the impact of mining operations in the long run. And that's why location matters, particularly when it comes to sulfide ore. When sulfide rock is exposed to air and water, it leaches acid. That's not environmental propaganda—that's just science. That acid, in turn, mobilizes toxic metals and other chemicals from the surrounding rock, contaminating aquatic systems, killing sensitive organisms, and accumulating up the food chain, eventually to humans.

It's safest to mine copper in the desert, or semi-arid regions, where, fortunately, copper is found in abundance. Mining copper in a water-rich environment, with little natural buffering, poses major challenges, and there are few, if any, success stories from such places. To locate a mine in such a place, within the watershed of a federal wilderness prized for its pristine water is nothing short of reckless.

Finally, Nolan turns to demagoguery, deploying the most overused and misleading applause line of mining boosters. "After 130 years of mining on the Iron Range, we've got the cleanest water in the state," he writes. It's sleight-of-hand, taking advantage of the fact that the region is divided by two major watersheds, and that mining pollution is largely limited (with the exception of Minntac) to one of them. What he doesn't mention is that he'd like to expand a significantly more dangerous form of mining into the region's other major watershed, which flows into the heart of the Boundary Waters.

Rep. Nolan likes to portray himself as an environmentalist. His record speaks otherwise. He regularly aligns himself in Washington with some of the most anti-environmental members of Congress, to further the exploitation of our public lands by oil, gas, and mining interests. He is seeking to change laws in Washington designed to protect our public lands from corporate give-aways. And even as he feigns concern for the green energy economy, he regularly backs the expansion of some of the dirtiest kinds of fossil fuel development, such as the tar sands in Alberta, Canada. If he truly backed the transition to a green energy economy, he'd be pushing to keep tar sands oil in the ground.

When it comes to the environment, talk is cheap. It's Rep. Nolan's actions that tell the real story.

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