Local View: Proposed Tamarack mine poses familiar environmental risks

From the column: "Exposing the fine print about a potential Talon/Rio Tinto/Kennecott nickel mine in Aitkin County matters."

Written By: Lynn Anderson and Paula Maccabee | 10:00 am, Dec. 5, 2021

Minnesotans must take a hard look at one-sided statements made by Talon Metals Corp. about its proposed nickel mine, including comments in the Nov. 13 News Tribune article, “Aitkin County nickel mine could begin permitting process in 2022.” Like the popular parlor game, for every three “facts” cited about this proposed Tamarack-area mine, there seem to be “two truths and a lie.”

Exposing the fine print about a potential Talon/Rio Tinto/Kennecott nickel mine in Aitkin County matters. Talon is proposing to mine a “massive sulphide mineralization”
at the headwaters of the Big Sandy Lake watershed, an hour southwest of Duluth. This watershed enjoys clean water and fresh air, abundant wild rice protected by treaty-reserved rights, treasured lake retreats, forests, and wildlife. It is a hunter’s and angler’s paradise.

A nickel mine in the area targeted for prospecting could pollute wild rice lakes, a national wildlife refuge, two wild and scenic rivers (the Kettle and St. Croix), and the downstream Mississippi River.

Talon states three “facts” about the outcome of its Tamarack-area nickel mine: The mine would excavate a rich nickel deposit, this rich nickel deposit would be highly profitable, and this “green nickel” would be America’s first domestic source of nickel for electric car batteries.

The Talon ore body is, in fact, a rich nickel deposit. Talon’s most recent Preliminary Economic Assessment claimed nickel concentrations of 5.72% nickel, 23 times the level claimed for the controversial PolyMet/Glencore copper-nickel mine. Similarly, Talon’s assessment projected high profits; its pre-tax internal rate of return could be as much as 56%, which would be five times more profitable than PolyMet/Glencore projections.

But the seductive promise that nickel profits from the Tamarack deposit would result in electric vehicle batteries seems unlikely. Talon’s assessment reveals that producing nickel sulfate for electric-vehicle batteries would provide a 38% profit while nickel concentrate or nickel powder for other uses would score a 53% or 56% profit. There is no reason to assume Talon or its mining conglomerate co-owners would choose a “green” nickel sulfate product over a fatter profit.

In addition, Tesla and other key players are now investing in developing iron-based batteries for electric vehicles that would not depend as much on expensive and toxic nickel and cobalt.

Talon’s “facts” about its efforts to be socially responsible must also be taken with a grain of salt. Talon states it will mine underground and store high-sulfur wastes underground. But Talon’s own documents show that highly reactive wastes will be stored above ground as well. In addition, faults and fractures underground could carry highly reactive waste through local aquifers in toxic plumes.
As Minnesotans, we know that clean water for drinking, fish, wild rice, wildlife, recreation, health, and a sustainable economy is our state’s most valuable resource. Sulfide mining has a 100% track record of failure to protect water quality in water-rich environments. This is not due to just operator error but to geology and chemistry. In a massive sulfide-ore deposit, like at the proposed Tamarack mine, any waste rock or tailings exposed to air and water would be highly reactive, which could result in acid mine drainage and leaching toxic metals.

Unfortunately, Minnesotans can’t rely on either our state Department of Natural Resources or the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to protect water and people in the face of pressure from corporate polluters in the permitting process. Community members must now join together to expose the truth about the risks of a toxic Tamarack mine and hold our agencies accountable to protect our environment. The stakes could not be higher.

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