

The whole truth about Talon Metals and Rio Tinto

Sulfide ore mining in the Tamarack region upstream of the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers has never been studied. Minnesotans need to know more.

by **Bruce Johnson, Paula Maccabee**

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An aerial view of the Talon Metals Nickel Project from a promotional video. Credit: Screen shot

In a recent Community Voices commentary ([“It’s just math: We need recycling and mining to achieve our clean energy goals,”](#) April 10), Todd Malan — the chief external affairs officer at Talon Metals and a previous vice president of corporate relations at global mining giant Rio Tinto — claims that sulfide ore mining is “just math” and that Minnesota needs to “mine today” so that “future generations” can “rely le mining.” That is not the whole truth.

First, it is equally “just math” that you could permit every risky and destructive sulfide ore mine proposed in Minnesota and the metals mined wouldn’t even put a dent in industry projections that nickel and copper need to increase by 40% to build out renewable energy.

Second, for Minnesota local and downstream communities, sulfide ore mining is not “just math.” Sulfide ore mining threatens the clean water and natural resources future generations will rely on for health, culture and their very survival. It is time for Minnesota to require that mining companies Talon Metals and Rio Tinto tell the whole truth about the dangers and scale of their proposed Tamarack nickel-cobalt-copper mine here in Minnesota. That would require a new regional study.

When sulfide ore mining was first proposed in northeast Minnesota’s Duluth Complex bedrock in the 1970s, our state required a comprehensive regional study of impacts of copper-nickel mine development in that region. Why was that study necessary?

The Minnesota Environmental Quality Board explained in its final Regional Copper-Nickel Study that “conventional site-specific environmental impact statements (EISs) and the corresponding regulatory process were inadequate to deal with the broader issues involving this unexploited resource.”

New sulfide mining proposed by Talon and Rio Tinto in our Mississippi and St. Croix River headwaters creates the very same problem.

Talon has proposed that all Minnesota needs to know would be provided in an EIS looking at the effects of mining 225 acres, even though Talon controls 31,000 acres of mineral leases and has drilled far to the north and south of its initial mining “project.” Talon’s corporate communications stress that the Tamarack Intrusive Complex is a “world-class high grade nickel, cobalt, copper district” and admit that the present deposit is only a tenth of 1% its total area.

How could an EIS covering a tenth of 1% of the potential Tamarack mining region protect the environment, cultural resources or future generations in Minnesota? It couldn’t.

Think about a surgeon about to cut into your abdomen who told you about the risks of only one tenth of 1% of your proposed operation. Wouldn’t you demand more information? How long would your whole operation take? How much would the incision be enlarged? What organs would be removed?

Scientists involved with Minnesota’s Copper-Nickel Study of the Duluth Complex emphasize that this 1970s report did not study the cumulative environmental, social and economic impacts of mining the Tamarack Intrusive Complex mineral deposit. Baseline data in the Tamarack region is inadequate to identify, avoid or

even minimize impacts to our air, water, public health and natural and cultural resources through the regulatory process.

Sulfide ore mining in the Mississippi River and St. Croix watersheds also raises new issues. How would sulfate pollution affect mercury contamination of fish in recreational lakes, the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway and Minnesota's largest population center downstream? What effects would massive dewatering from underground mining have on Minnesota's shallow lakes, tamarack bogs and some of our state's most abundant wild rice beds?

A regional study of the Tamarack Intrusive Complex is also urgently needed because scientific knowledge has developed in the past 44 years. New science has established that sulfate pollution kills wild rice and that toxic mercury can magnify as much as one million times in the food chain. New evidence demonstrates the risks of lung disease from inhaling nickel and asbestos-like fibers and the threats of cancer from arsenic and of neurological damage from manganese in drinking water. The Eagle Mine, previously owned by Rio Tinto, is no proof of safety; it has polluted groundwater with both nitrates and arsenic.

Before any mining company is allowed to cut into the earth in Minnesota's Mississippi or St. Croix watersheds, Minnesota needs to obtain scientific data and cumulative analysis of potential harms of the entire Tamarack region operation. Then, armed with the whole truth on cumulative risks and benefits, Minnesotans can decide whether we want to go through with the major sulfide mining operation proposed by Talon Metals/Rio Tinto or whether to send them packing.

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