

OPINION COLUMNS

Local View: Mining bill means more federal takeover

From the column: "Minnesotans deserve a complete and truthful dialog and a demonstrable understanding of the consequences of irreversibly erasing our wild treasures and natural resources."



Mike Maleska

By Mike Maleska

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Minnesotans understand that watersheds and water are important. That's why we pro-Boundary Waters folks say that a copper-nickel mine in the watershed of the BWCAW would negatively affect the wilderness.

Water flows very well, and science shows that any mine upstream of the Boundary Waters inevitably could leak tons of a variety of toxins into public waters. Copper mines leak, unless their entire

waste stream (waste rock and tailings) is encased and 100% contained, meaning dual liners with underleak detection. Even then, when mining pits are drained, water pumped out can carry dissolved sulfates and other toxic metals released when blasts shatter rock. Disasters are probable.

Minnesota mine permits are famous for being highly adjustable after being granted. And Minnesota agencies have never required an environmental impact statement for a mine expansion. Twin Metals, for example, was trying to get a permit for 224 million tons while the reserve is 1.2 billion tons of ore. We're not fooled. The company isn't just going to mine a little bit.

A federal bill to repeal a mining ban in northern Minnesota's Superior National Forest (HJ140) isn't just about a little mine. It's about opening up the entire protected national forest — federal lands — to any and all private mineral exploitation, even as special interests try to strip away state regulatory control. Mining also means forest destruction. We have seen the inevitable outcome of a bare cutover region. Economic exploitation at the expense of everything that makes northern Minnesota what it is would be the worst possible trade we could make. It would be a permanent loss.

Minnesota Mining Executive Director Julie Lucas seemed to severely misunderstand the bill while advocating for it in a Feb. 22 commentary in the News Tribune (Local View: “ [Facts about the BWCAW matter as Senate mining vote nears](https://www.duluthnewtribune.com/opinion/columns/local-view-facts-about-the-bwca-matter-as-senate-mining-vote-nears) ”). It would permanently shift protection of our environment from Minnesota and into the hands of the federal government — and internationally connected corporate donors. It's not just a deregulation, as I and others see it; it's an enormous government takeover of every state's right to make decisions in their own best interest.

Lucas also seemed to misunderstand how our regulatory process functions in Minnesota; she characterized it as strong and enforceable without citing specifically how. She leaned on an

appeal to the authority of science, apparently believing it supported her perspective.

Does she know how many mines have requirements for sulfate limits? None. Or what may or may not happen if those mines violate limits? Or does she know how many tons of sulfate flow downstream from taconite mines in all three watersheds every year? What about the lawsuits Keetac filed to avoid having to comply with sulfate limits? Everything she wrote in her commentary was contrary to what mining advocates said at a Sept. 3 Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Keetac water-quality permit hearing in Virginia, Minnesota, when they insisted there be no sulfate controls on taconite.

Her last three paragraphs were, with respect, laughable.

Her point that the “Boundary Waters are governed by layered state and federal laws designed specifically to prevent degradation” was true, but the laws are currently weak. And those laws vanish if HJ140 is enacted, removing the state from the equation.

Minnesotans deserve a complete and truthful dialog and a demonstrable understanding of the consequences of irreversibly erasing our wild treasures and natural resources.

Current protections are temporary. The lease withdrawal for mining upstream of the Boundary Waters is needed. Standards are not enforced. Environmental review in Minnesota is scientific and structured but has never been accountable. No framework exists without strict enforcement.

Science does not get old. It is truth incarnate from when it was faithfully distilled from hypothesis and proven through fact, testing, and more proof. Science is often updated with new factual revelations and discoveries. The idea of dismissing old science is abhorrent where our majestic wild waters, air, woods, and our ability to recreate safely in a nontoxic environment in perpetuity are exchanged for money in the pockets of a few oligarchs.

I'm sorry, advocates of copper-nickel mining, but it's time to get on the correct side of this issue — and bring along your love of Minnesota.

Mike Maleska of Hibbing retired after working as a taconite miner for 42 years. He's a former union president, Marine Corps veteran, angler, and hunter who's active in grassroots politics. He wrote this for the News Tribune.

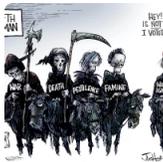
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