Toxic sulfide mining threatens Boundary Waters

Mercury, sulfuric acid could pollute state treasures

The Boundary Waters and Lake Superior are priceless natural treasures. Yet mining companies such as PolyMet are still trying to obtain permits that will allow them to conduct a toxic new form of mining near these protected areas.

This new kind of mining—called sulfide mining—produces toxic sulfuric acid and increases mercury contamination, both of which could find their way into the Boundary Waters and Lake Superior if mining companies are allowed to open their destructive mines. This kind of toxic mine drainage can turn water extremely acidic and kill fish and other wildlife.

Assault on environmental protections

Because of the predicted pollution, mining companies haven’t been able to obtain permits yet. But that hasn’t stopped them from trying. They’ve been hard at work spreading the myth that their mines will be clean and nonpolluting, while simultaneously trying to undermine the laws that prevent them from polluting the Boundary Waters and Lake Superior:

- This year, mining lobbyists pushed bills to weaken protections for wild rice. These protections regulate the amount of sulfate in Minnesota’s waters, thus limiting the amount of pollution that mines can leach into surrounding waterways.

- This spring, U.S. Rep. Chip Cravaack announced plans to introduce a land exchange bill that would put thousands of acres of Superior National Forest at risk of sulfide mining development and bypass environmental protections, like the Endangered Species Act. Our staff met with members of Congress in March to oppose this dangerous land exchange.

The EPA already knows hard-rock mining is the largest source of toxic waste in the country. That’s why it opposed PolyMet’s original mine plan and has kept new mining at bay so far. But this fall, PolyMet is expected to release a new mine plan, and we need your help.

With your support, we can continue to engage the public and build the kind of grassroots movement that can stand up to the mining industry and protect the Boundary Waters and Lake Superior from sulfide mining.

take action

- Acid mine drainage, the toxic byproduct of sulfide mining. Northern Minnesota and the Boundary Waters hold some of the cleanest water in the country. Allowing mining pollution would be a tragedy. Go online and tell the EPA to oppose these toxic mines: www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org.
How do you want to be remembered?

You can be remembered as someone who cared enough to keep up the fight for a cleaner, greener, healthier future by making a bequest to Environment Minnesota or the Environment Minnesota Research & Policy Center.

For information, call: 1-800-841-7299, or email PlannedGiving@EnvironmentMinnesota.org.

Recent action

Tax plan to level playing field for renewable energy

President Obama released his framework for corporate tax reform on Feb. 22, which includes provisions to eliminate tax breaks to the oil and gas industries and seeks to expand the manufacture of clean energy technologies.

Federal Clean Energy Advocate Courtney Abrams issued the following statement in response: “By cutting tax breaks to oil and gas companies—that for decades have profited at the expense of our health and environment—and instead investing in burgeoning clean energy industries, the administration recognizes that we can both grow our economy and ensure a future with cleaner air and water for all Americans. We applaud the Obama administration’s commitment to responsibly developing truly clean energy sources like wind and solar power.”

Lobby days: Bringing your messages to Washington

In March, Samantha Chadwick and Michelle Hesterberg of Environment Minnesota traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with members of the Minnesota congressional delegation.

While there, they asked our members of Congress to restore Clean Water Act protections to all of our waterways. This spring, the Obama administration did just that, finalizing guidelines to restore clean water rules to many of the rivers, streams and wetlands that feed Minnesota’s 10,000 lakes (see back page).

Chadwick and Hesterberg also asked our leaders to vote for public health protections to clean up the air we breathe. And they urged our legislators to oppose any bills designed to bypass environmental rules that protect Minnesota’s environment from toxic sulfide mining or create special exemptions for polluting industries.

The continued support of our members allows us to meet with these leaders and hold them accountable for the protection of Minnesota’s air, water and open space.
4 out of 5 Minnesotans hit by recent weather disasters

Extensive on the rise
After a year that saw many parts of the country hit by scorching heat, devastating wildfires, severe storms and record flooding, a new Environment Minnesota report documents how global warming could lead to certain extreme weather events becoming even more common or more severe in the future. The report found that, already, 242 million people—or roughly 4 out of 5 Americans—live in counties affected by federally declared weather-related disasters since 2006.

In Minnesota, 75 counties housing 4,319,080 people were hit by at least one weather-related disaster from 2006 to 2011. Included in this tally of extreme weather events are the southern Minnesota floods of 2010, which occurred as a result of abnormally heavy rainfall in the area. The floods resulted in the evacuation of hundreds of residents and caused more than $64 million in damage. All told, federal disaster areas were declared in 21 Minnesota counties.

As climate changes, so does weather
Destructive weather-related disasters such as the floods of 2010 are becoming more common, and the likelihood of dangerous flooding is increasing: The report shows that the United States has experienced an increase in heavy precipitation events, with the rainiest 1 percent of all storms delivering 20 percent more rain on average at the end of the 20th century than at the beginning. This trend toward extreme precipitation is projected to continue in a warming world.

It’s past time to take action
“The bottom line is that extreme weather is happening, it is causing very serious problems, and global warming increases the likelihood that we’ll see even more extreme weather in the future,” added Nathan Willcox, our federal global warming program director. “Carbon pollution from our power plants, cars and trucks is fueling global warming, and so tackling global warming demands that we cut emissions of carbon pollution from those sources.”

We released the report as the Obama administration began finalizing historic new carbon pollution and fuel efficiency standards for cars and light trucks and as the Environmental Protection Agency was poised to develop carbon pollution standards for coal-fired power plants—the largest single source of the carbon pollution that is fueling global warming.

“We applaud the Obama administration for the clean car standards they are finalizing and urge the EPA to move ahead with strong carbon pollution standards for coal-fired power plants,” said Willcox. “Extreme weather is a frightening reminder of why we must cut the dangerous carbon pollution that is fueling global warming, and lessen the threat of even worse extreme weather in the future.”

Minnesota Power makes solar more accessible & affordable

Minnesotans will now have greater access to affordable solar power, thanks to new incentives for customers who install solar-electric power arrays.

Minnesota Power, the electric utility serving central and northeastern Minnesota, recently introduced a rebate of $1,000 per kilowatt generated by solar power technology manufactured in Minnesota. This means that for every surplus kW of electricity an individual or business generates using Minnesota-made solar technology, Minnesota Power will give them a rebate of $1,000. This is an additional incentive on top of the existing base rebate of $2,000 per kW. The new incentives are roughly double the amount formerly offered by the utility.

In addition to making solar energy more viable, this Minnesota-made incentive will also likely benefit Minnesota-based solar manufacturers, such as tenKsolar of Bloomington and Silicon Energy of Mountain Iron. Not only is solar energy good for Minnesota’s environment—it has the potential to create quality local jobs as well.

Minnesota Power also reduced the minimum array size to 5 kW, down from 10 kW, and rebates will be paid immediately after installation. A modest-sized system could qualify for more than $20,000 in combined rebates and incentives. A residential solar system can cost $30,000 or more before rebates.

Customers planning a solar project must submit an application and obtain approval from Minnesota Power before installing a system. Details about the program are available on the company’s website.

Since 2006, weather-related disasters have affected 75 counties housing nearly 4 out of 5 Minnesotans.

You can view the full interactive map at www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org/page/ame/map-recent-weather-related-disasters.
Environment Minnesota

Our mission
We all want clean air, clean water and open space. But it takes independent research and tough-minded advocacy to win concrete results for our environment, especially when powerful interests stand in the way of environmental progress.

That’s the idea behind Environment Minnesota. We focus exclusively on protecting Minnesota’s air, water and open space. We speak out and take action at the local, state and national levels to improve the quality of our environment and our lives.

Summer Report
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On the verge of victory for our 10,000 lakes

Minnesota is on the verge of winning new protections for hundreds of miles of streams that feed and filter our lakes. But just as President Obama is about to sign off on the biggest victory for clean water in a decade, some polluter-friendly members of Congress are doing everything they can to block him.

Thanks to two polluter-driven Supreme Court decisions in the last decade, more than half of our streams and hundreds of acres of wetlands—the same waterways that flow into our lakes—have not been nearly as protected as they once were. Thankfully, last April, the Obama administration proposed new guidelines to restore protections to many of our waterways. And in February, the administration announced that it was in the last stage before officially finalizing these protections. But our work is not done. As we build support for the president to finalize the guidelines, many in Congress are working to stop him. As of May, there were four separate rollback attempts in the House and Senate. Environment Minnesota is committed to defending these new protections.

The Obama administration’s new guidelines will restore Clean Water Act protections to the streams and wetlands that feed and filter our 10,000 lakes.

Visit our website and tell President Obama you want to see all our waterways protected: www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org.