

Carolyn J. Sampson: An extraordinary incursion of the public forest

A mining company would like to operate in Superior National without the usual reviews. Three leaders would like to pave the way.

By CAROLYN J. SAMPSON

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Minnesotans, especially those who love the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and surrounding Superior National Forest, should be disturbed by a recent proposal from three of Minnesota's elected officials. This proposal would provide special treatment to a Canadian-owned mining company so it can operate a strip mine in northeastern Minnesota.

Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Norm Coleman and Rep. James Oberstar have introduced bills that would authorize the U.S. Forest Service to sell 6,700 acres of Superior National Forest to PolyMet Mining Corp. Existing law requires a thorough assessment of the land's value and an exchange for an equivalent parcel -- a time-tested process that safeguards the public interest and protects the environment. The proposed bills grant an exception to this process, bypass existing safeguards and enable the outright sale of federal forest land to PolyMet -- to the benefit of PolyMet and to the detriment of the public interest.

What is even more disturbing is that Klobuchar's, Coleman's and Oberstar's proposed special treatment would expedite the creation of a sulfide mine, the first mine of this kind in Minnesota.

Sulfide mining is nothing like the mining familiar to us all on the Iron Range. No sulfide mine has ever been shown to operate without causing acid mine drainage, the toxic combination of sulfuric acid and heavy metals. Acid mine drainage elsewhere has resulted in severe and permanent environmental damage to land surrounding mines and to lakes, rivers and wetlands downstream.

Proponents of this strip mine say it will be "safe," but we have no proof outside of small-scale tests. This strip mine is essentially a large-scale, high-risk experiment conducted right in the midst of our precious public lands.

That Klobuchar, Coleman and Oberstar want to boost the economy of northeastern Minnesota by supporting a new mining industry is understandable, but their proposal to

bypass existing safeguards in order to sell public land is an irresponsible use of the power that voters have given them. To do so before there has been a full public discussion and debate about the merits and dangers of sulfide mining in Minnesota is a real breach of public trust.

This proposed legislation would set a dangerous precedent for the administration of our public lands. We expect such lands to be properly managed, not sold off to special interests in deals conducted behind closed doors. We deserve a full public discussion of sulfide mining and all of its risks before our land is forever changed by it.

Our beautiful, unique lake country is beloved by people all over the United States and throughout the world. It deserves better treatment than what Sens. Klobuchar and Coleman and Rep. Oberstar propose.

Carolyn J. Sampson is chair of the board of directors of the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness.