



FOR THE SAKE OF OUR CHILDREN: THE SCHOOL TRUST ISSUE

By Elanne Palcich

Can we trust our legislators when they claim that school trust land bills are in the best interests of our children? During the current session, legislation is being introduced to maximize revenue from school trust lands by expediting a land exchange and creating a legislative commission to replace Department of Natural Resources (DNR) management of the trust lands.

When Minnesota became a state in 1858, sections 16 and 36 of every township were set aside in trust for the benefit of schools. The state could use, lease, or sell the land to raise money for education. A Permanent School Fund (PSF) was established, consisting of accumulated revenues from the land, with only the interest money to be used on a yearly basis.

Much of the trust land was sold by the mid 1880's, mostly for agriculture and development. Today approximately 2.5 million acres of trust lands remain in Minnesota, with a PSF of about \$750 million.

The remaining trust lands are located mainly in northeast Minnesota. Approximately 86,000 acres of state trust lands are currently locked within the borders of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). Lands within the wilderness cannot be logged, leased, or mined. Hence they are not generating money for the school trust, although a recreational fee was proposed in the past. About 22,000 of the above acres were added to the trust under swampland designation, and never intended to generate revenue.

These state inholdings could be sold to the Federal government, providing an immediate increase to the PSF. Moneys for the sale are available through Land and Water Conservation Funds. Such a sale fell through in the 1990's because the Iron Range delegation wanted a land exchange instead. The idea was

to trade the state lands within the BWCAW for Federal land outside of the BWCAW, with the intention of generating money for the fund through more intensive logging.

A rush of exploration for copper-nickel and trace metals in northeast Minnesota has re-ignited the school trust lands issue. Iron Range Representative Tom Rukavina, D-Virginia, has predicted that the PSF could more than double over the next decade if copper mining plans proceed on trust lands.

During the most recent two year cycle, PSF interest money contributed about \$55 million to supplement the \$15 billion K-12 education budget. This amounts to \$26 per student above the approximately \$10,000 allotted from the general fund. In other words, doubling the trust fund revenue over the next ten years by one-time mining of trust lands would only add another \$26 per student.

A bill to expedite a land exchange is working its way through the legislature. During committee debate of HF 2207, Rep. David Dill, D-Crane Lake, argued, "...we should mine, log, and lease the hell out of that land that we get in the [ex]change." The bill was tabled, only to re-emerge by the end of the day as an amendment to the House Omnibus bill, subtitled Creation of the Children's State Forest. The Children's State Forest is the land that we would "mine, log, and lease the hell out of."

In a press release dated December 9, 2011, 8th District U.S. Congressman Chip Cravaack announced his plans to introduce Federal legislation that would authorize the exchange of approximately 86,000 acres of State lands in the BWCAW for a yet to be determined amount of National Forest land outside the wilderness boundary. Because land within the BWCAW is highly valued, the ratio of exchange would be greater than 1:1; this would significantly reduce the size of Superior National Forest and impact the watershed.

Removing land from Federal ownership removes restrictions regarding mining. These include prevention of open pit strip mining under the Weeks Act, adherence to the Endangered Species Act, and compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process regarding public comment and environmental review.

The mining of sulfide ores has a notorious history of leaving behind acid mine drainage and leaching of toxic heavy metals. Contamination of surface waters requires perpetual treatment, lasting hundreds to thousands of years. According to Dr. David Blowes of the University of Waterloo in Canada, all sulfide mines contaminate the groundwater.

The mining of highly disseminated low-grade ores leaves a huge footprint on the landscape. Ninety-nine percent of the rock becomes waste material. The scale of mining makes it virtually impossible to prevent contamination of the environment. Once mined, the resulting pits, waste rock piles, and tailings basins remain unusable.

Taconite mining is currently leaving its own footprint (25% iron, 75% waste rock), while polluting the waterways with mercury, sulfates and metals. Although there are no available solutions for clean-up of the St. Louis River watershed, the Range delegation continues to promote more mining.

Legislators press for maximizing revenues from school trust lands while ignoring the health impacts of the mining industry. Mercury, which is released from both taconite and power plants, affects fetal brain development. Pregnant women and young children are advised not to eat fish from waters where mercury has accumulated in the food chain. Dust and airborne fibers from mining contribute to asthma, allergies, and cancers.

Legislators are also ignoring history. The lands of Superior National Forest were set aside for watershed protection and the benefit of all citizens of this country. Superior National Forest and the BWCAW serve as a legacy of our nation's past, and are areas of biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunity for all, including future generations.

Legislators are using their political influence to convince educators and school boards that it is in the best interest of our children to convert trust fund lands into a mining district. When those with good intentions fail to educate themselves beyond mining company propaganda, future generations pay the price—loss of a healthy environment. Political and educational leaders are not modeling what we strive to teach our students: to base their conclusions upon critical thinking.

We cannot allow political rhetoric to use “for the sake of our children” as an excuse to sacrifice our health, our water and our land. The school trust issue —seeking to turn parts of Superior National Forest over to the state to maximize logging and mining —destroys the natural inheritance entrusted to us by past generations. Generating extra education moneys for one generation of children at the expense of future generations is a travesty of the trust our children place in us.

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