



Halfway Ranger Station dwelling, built in 1934, eligible for listing with the National Registry of Historic Places. Source - USFS

Kawishiwi Demolition: The Pen and the Bulldozer

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On August 10, a public comment period ended regarding the demolition of the Kawishiwi Research Station, as proposed by the USFS and NRS (Northern Research Station).

One must go back in time to trace the history of the Kawishiwi site, located just off Highway 1 along the Kawishiwi River, approximately 12 miles south of Ely.

In 1891, U.S. forest reserves were established to protect timber and hydrological resources. In 1907, these reserves were changed to the National Forest System; Superior National Forest was designated under President Teddy Roosevelt in 1909.

In 1910, two buildings were in use at the newly established Halfway Ranger Station. The site was about a day's walk between Ely and the next station, thereby "Halfway," on what was then the Stony Tote Road (which became Highway 1 in 1921). The site also had access to the Kawishiwi River canoe route.

In the 1930's, members of Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) erected seven more buildings on the site, offering rooming facilities and office space for forest research. These buildings are currently eligible for listing with the National Registry of Historic Places, designated as the Halfway Ranger Station Historic District.

In 1950, the Halfway Ranger district offices were moved to Ely. The Kawishiwi site remained as a base for forest research. In 1955, a 1600-acre experimental forest was established with research conducted out of the buildings. Between 1948 and 1974, Miron "Bud" Heinselman mapped the history of the severity and density of wildfires in northeast Minnesota. His definitive book, "The Boundary Waters Wilderness Ecosystem," was published in 1996.

Mammalian studies began at the station in 1968. Sigurd Olson's field work resulted in the first published scientific study of wolves. Other studies included Lynn Rogers' early work with bears, UMN research on moose, deer, black bear, and ravens, and Department of the Interior (DOI) research on the American marten and the Canadian lynx. DOI (US Geological Survey) research continues to the present on wolves and white tailed deer.

The most highly publicized and widespread mammalian work to come out of the Kawishiwi Research Station (K Lab) is that of David Mech. His work represents the longest standing wolf research in North America, with studies distributed worldwide. Researchers from various countries have studied at the lab.

In 1974, the Department of Agriculture took over management of the Kawishiwi buildings as the Northern Research Station. The USFS retained control of the land. The NRS is one of 28 research stations representing 20 states across the northeastern and mid-western parts of our country.

As stated in the EA document, the NRS now claims it has no interest in using, rehabilitating, or maintaining the Kawishiwi site buildings. The NRS is ignoring its own mission of working with the themes of studying forest disturbance processes, sustaining forests, providing clean air and water, and inventorying and monitoring resources, and of a focus upon people living in harmony with the landscape. This vision would seem a perfect fit for the Ely area.

Other researchers and student groups currently using the Kawishiwi Research Lab have advised that the site is an ideal location for studying the effects of climate change on the immediate environment, including forests and wildlife. These concerns are also being ignored.

The USFS and NRS are ignoring another very important consideration within their published EA. On July 21st, midway through the citizen comment period, Duluth Metals announced a partnership with Antofagasta (henceforth Twin Metals Minnesota) to do a three year feasibility study on the Nokomis Deposit of copper nickel mineralization. On August 3, Governor Pawlenty issued a unilateral State of Minnesota Proclamation supporting the announced joint venture between Canadian Duluth Metals and Chilean Antofagasta to mine underneath the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW).

The mine plan as presented on the Duluth Metals website puts the entrance to its proposed underground mine precisely in the location of the Kawishiwi Research Station. This also puts the proposed mine entrance alongside the South Kawishiwi River and approximately four miles south of the BWCAW border.

Duluth Metals has assayed its Nokomis Deposit as averaging .6% copper, .2% nickel, and grams per ton of precious metals. The resulting 99% waste rock and tailings, with acid producing potential from the sulfide ores, would need to be stored above ground during mining operations. Tunnels underneath lakes within the BWCAW would bear the risk of subsidence.

Evidently the USFS-NRS doesn't want to deal with these possibilities. It would be far easier to demolish the Kawishiwi buildings, paving the way for a land exchange process that would turn the land over to the mining companies.

In the process of destroying the Kawishiwi Research Station buildings and research mission, the USFS-NRS would destroy—in one fell swoop of the pen and one fell scoop of the bulldozer—one hundred years of USFS history and heritage.

The EA, as written and presented, goes against the very Federal policy that the USFS and NRS are supposed to be following. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) states that connected actions are not to take place in anticipation of permitting. For instance, there is no guarantee that market conditions in 3 to 5 years time will support such low-grade mining, or that public opinion will allow mining within an area of national significance.

The USFS is ignoring its mandate to protect the BWCAW under the national Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Boundary Waters Wilderness Act of 1978. In ignoring both fact (mineral leasing and announcement of agreements) and law, the USFS is misleading and misrepresenting the public.

Environmental groups, as well as individual citizens, are requesting that the USFS/NRS complete a full environmental impact statement (EIS) on the Kawishiwi Buildings Disposition, addressing all areas of concern. If we allow copper nickel mining to take place under the BWCAW, and under the radar of the environmental review pen, we will lose the character of our wilderness to the bulldozers.

Update: According to current hearsay, the USFS is arranging to move wolf research to the Ely Ranger Station, even though this does not provide housing for the scientists. The USFS is also contacting the Department of Health to inspect the Kawishiwi site buildings for condemnation. This will pave the way for the USFS to proceed with the Proposed Action of historic building demolition without an EIS and without further public comment.



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USFS Halfway Ranger Station Historic District and "K" Lab near Ely, Minnesota
Superior National Forest -On the Kawishiwi River and the edge of the BWCAW



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