

Local View: OUR OWN APPALACHIA

Over the years we've seen, in the Appalachia region of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, what happens when a single industry becomes a sacred cow, supported by politicians across the spectrum for their own self-interest and political survival. The end result has been tops literally blown off mountains, vanishing streams, and continued poverty in the local communities.

This scene is unfortunately now playing out in northeastern Minnesota, as our local, state, and national politicians compete with each other to see who can offer the loudest support for corporations entering our state to strip-mine copper, nickel, and other metals from the Iron Range.

Lost in the politicians' rush to support this new type of mining in the state is not only the horrid record of similar mining projects across the country, but the facts disclosed in the just-released draft environmental review for the PolyMet proposal.

For instance, the proposed mine site is within the Superior National Forest, and an open pit strip mine is not even allowed. Instead of enforcing this provision to protect a public resource, the Forest Service has entered into private negotiations for an "exchange" of our national forest lands to PolyMet.

The proposed mine would directly destroy more than 850 acres of high-quality wetlands, with more than 650 additional acres of wetlands indirectly impaired, for a total wetlands impact of more than 1,500 acres. And the vast majority of the required wetlands mitigation would occur *outside* the St. Louis River watershed.

Lakes and streams downstream of the proposed site are already impaired due to mercury pollution, prompting fish consumption advisories. The proposed mine would result in seepage of high sulfate concentrations, which according to the draft analysis would create "high risk situations" for mercury methylation. As explained in the analysis, methyl mercury is the "active form of mercury that accumulates in fish and is toxic to humans and wildlife."

The proposed mine would place tailings on the former LTV tailings basin, which is unlined and already causing seepage to groundwater and surface water.

According to the experts of the tribal cooperating agencies, water collection and treatment would be needed for 2,000 years to avoid further water-quality contamination. How do you factor that into any financial assurance from the mining company?

The PolyMet mine would also destroy nearly 1,500 acres of critical habitat for Canada lynx and wolves. Moreover, the project would affect two of the only 13 remaining wildlife corridors across the Iron Range, with additional projects anticipated to affect nine of these corridors.

The mine would generate nearly 400 million tons of waste rock and would have an annual carbon footprint of 767,648 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

The mine site is also located within the 1854 Treaty Ceded Territory, where the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and Grand Portage Band of Chippewa retain hunting, fishing, and gathering rights.

And PolyMet is just the first of a number of potential copper-nickel mines in northeastern Minnesota, with our political leadership showing little restraint in its thirst for supporting this type of industry across the region.

If we commit to decades of additional and environmentally harmful mining, are we locking ourselves into a permanent, resource-extraction economy — at the price of long-term pollution from Lake Superior to the Boundary Waters — while driving away other industry and points of view? Too bad our politicians have apparently failed to ask this question.

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