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Reader's view: Editorial left out vital PolyMet information

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Readers of the News Tribune deserved better journalism than that offered in the March 1 editorial, "Back off, St. Paul," concerning non-ferrous mining legislation. Serious journalists would have identified issues the legislation seeks to resolve and evaluated their validity, checked facts, and sought views from a balanced set of sources rather than relying so seemingly heavily on industry representatives. The editorial failed on all counts.

The proposed legislation addresses at least three major issues, which the editorial failed to identify and evaluate. The legislation would prevent approval of mining operations when the site cannot be fully reclaimed or would require water treatment in perpetuity, hold accountable any participating party (so that a parent company cannot retreat to Canada and avoid damage claims), and require financial assurance against damage claims take a form that will survive bankruptcy (bankruptcy being an apparently favorite tactic of mining companies facing environmental damage claims).

The editorial emphasized that the PolyMet rock to be extracted is relatively low in sulfur content. But sulfur content is only one variable that determines the potential for toxic waste. Most importantly, the amount of copper extracted in mining is proportional to the amount of sulfide in the rock removed. Lower sulfide content simply means that more waste rock must be removed to achieve the same amount of copper. The PolyMet project will result in storage of almost 400 million tons of waste rock and lean ore, with enormous potential for acid-waste drainage.

The editorial cited two industry representatives as sources. Serious journalists would have contacted a more-balanced set of sources and would have sought examples of successful and safe mining operations using similar technologies under relatively similar environmental conditions. There are not any.

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