

Support for banning sulfide-ore copper mining on public lands in the Boundary Waters watershed

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW or Boundary Waters) is a world-class canoe trekking, camping, hunting, and sport fishing destination. The Boundary Waters supports a stable human population and a vibrant, steadily growing, and diversified amenity-based economy in northeastern Minnesota. Peer-reviewed and published science demonstrates that pollution from sulfide-ore copper mining in the watershed of the Boundary Waters would flow into the heart of the Boundary Waters and downstream into Quetico Provincial Park and Voyageurs National Park. Pollution of water flowing into Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario would violate Article IV of the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, to which the United States and Canada are signatories. In Article IV of the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, both countries agreed not to pollute the boundary waters and waters flowing across the international boundary to the injury of health or property on the other side.

On December 18, 2019, Antofagasta, the Chilean multinational mining company and owner of the proposed Twin Metals Minnesota sulfide-ore copper mine, submitted a draft mine plan of operations. This plan would build ore processing facilities, mine exhaust ventilation infrastructure, sulfuric acid storage tanks, and a permanent 130-foot-tall tailings dump covering nearly one square mile; all in the Superior National Forest, in the Boundary Waters watershed, and on the shores of Birch Lake and the South Kawishiwi River. Birch Lake and the South Kawishiwi River are the most heavily-used non-wilderness recreational waters in the Rainy River-Headwaters. Birch Lake and the South Kawishiwi River flow through the White Iron Chain of Lakes, to Fall Lake, and into the Boundary Waters.

No sulfide-ore copper mine has ever operated and been closed for at least 10 years without being documented to be polluting surrounding surface and/or groundwater. The components of pollution from sulfide-ore copper mining typically include heavy metals, sulfate, and sometimes but not always low pH (a.k.a., acid). Heavy metals are toxic to aquatic life, and sulfate is documented in peer-reviewed and published scientific articles to play an essential role in the conversion of elemental mercury to methyl-mercury. Methyl-mercury is the form of mercury that bio-accumulates up the food web, so that fish may contain concentrations of methyl-mercury millions of times higher than the surrounding water column of lakes and rivers. Methyl-mercury, cadmium, lead and other heavy metals generated directly or indirectly from sulfide-ore copper mining are potent neuro-toxins which, when ingested with fish, may cause irreversible damage to human brain function.

At least 30 businesses (one of which alone employs more than 100 people) and scores of residences and cabins, line the shores of Birch Lake, the South Kawishiwi River, the White Iron Chain of Lakes, and Fall Lake. If the mine facilities are built, these businesses would be harmed—some forced to close—by the noise pollution, air pollution, light pollution, damaged views, and water pollution from Antofagasta's Twin Metals Mine. The noise pollution, air pollution, light pollution, and permanent water pollution would forever change the character of Birch Lake, the South Kawishiwi River, and nearby Boundary Waters entry points (South Kawishiwi River, Gabbro Lake, Farm Lake).

Harvard economics Professor and former Chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisors, James Stock, modeled the income and jobs effects of a Twin Metals Minnesota sulfide-ore copper mine versus a ban on sulfide-ore copper mining in the Boundary Waters watershed. Professor Stock found that the economic region around the Boundary Waters would experience a net loss of jobs and a net reduction in income if the Twin Metals Minnesota mine were allowed in the Boundary Waters watershed.

2018 polling by Fabrizio Ward found that 56% of likely Minnesota voters in the 8th Congressional District, and 70% of likely Minnesota voters statewide, are opposed to opening sulfide-ore copper mines on the edge of the Boundary Waters. The Twin Metals Mine could not be built without using federal and Minnesota public lands and minerals, owned alike by all Minnesotans and Americans.

Therefore, be it resolved, that the Izaak Walton League of America, assembled in convention July 21, 2021, supports banning sulfide-ore copper mining on all federal and state lands in the Boundary Waters watershed (including the Rainy River Headwaters and northern portion of the Vermillion Headwaters watersheds). The League further calls for permanent protection of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Quetico Provincial Park, and Voyageurs National Park from contamination by proposed sulfide-ore copper mining in the Superior National Forest, and protection of the established and growing amenity-based economy of northeastern Minnesota.