

MINING

Interior revives Minn. leases denied under Obama

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This map shows the proposed site of the Twin Metals mine in northern Minnesota. The Interior Department yesterday renewed leases for the project. Claudine Hellmuth/E&E News

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The Trump administration yesterday said it has reinstated lease applications rejected under President Obama for a controversial copper-nickel mine in northern Minnesota.

Twin Metals Minnesota LLC, a subsidiary of Chilean copper giant Antofagasta PLC, applied in 2012 to renew two mineral leases in the Superior National Forest near Ely, Minn.

The leases, held in the Iron Range region since 1966, were renewed in 1989 and 2004, but Obama Interior Department attorneys **determined** that Twin Metals did not have an automatic right to renewal ([Greenwire](#), Dec 15, 2016).

In 2016, the Bureau of Land Management rejected the leases based on potential pollution risks associated with developing a major mining project 3 miles from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and in a shared watershed.

Under President Trump, Interior reversed its stance on the renewal application. Department spokeswoman Heather Swift confirmed the reinstatements in an email.

The decision comes after a December [memorandum](#) by Interior's Office of the Solicitor stating, "While the United States maintains discretion to impose reasonable new terms and conditions in the lease renewal agreements, the BLM does not have the discretion to deny the renewal application."

With the reinstatement, Swift said Twin Metals can resume previously approved mineral exploration but is not authorized to begin mining.

"Twin Metals looks forward to working with federal agencies in the coming months to complete the proper process of renewing the company's federal leases," the company said in a statement.

In January, the Forest Service downgraded — from an environmental impact statement to an environmental assessment — the review ordered by the Obama administration on whether to impose a 20-year ban on new mining claims across 234,000 acres of national forest, including the project area ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 26).

The current two-year ban expires in January 2019. The leases would be unaffected by a ban because their 2004 approval predates the temporary ban.

The reinstatement decision drew scorn from environmental groups.

"This is the latest example of President Trump selling out our public lands for private interests — a foreign mining company in this case," Drew McConville, government liaison for the Wilderness Society, said in a statement. "Moreover, the agency's attempt to breathe new life into leases that expired almost a year and a half ago does not appear to be lawful."