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SAVE THE BOUNDARY WATERS

100 Days of Action to Save the Boundary Waters: Copper Mining Threatens the Clean Water Legacy of the Wilderness

(ELY, MN)-- On World Water Day and on the heels of the news that the Biden administration is reviewing risky mineral leases near the Boundary Waters, the Campaign to Save the Boundary Waters' 100 Days of Action looks at how copper mining threatens the clean water legacy of the Wilderness. The Superior National Forest, which contains the Boundary Waters and where the proposed Twin Metals mine would be located, holds about 20 percent of all freshwater in the National Park System. Chilean mining conglomerate Antofagasta's Twin Metals, a risky, untested sulfide-ore copper mine, would contaminate the Boundary Waters with toxic metals and other contaminants – including acid, arsenic, and lead – which would flow into the Wilderness, jeopardizing rivers and lakes where Minnesotans fish, swim, spend time with their families, and get drinking water.

"The news that the Biden administration is reviewing the Twin Metals leases is a hopeful sign for everyone who loves the clean water of the Boundary Waters," said Save the Boundary Waters Executive Director Tom Landwehr. "The clean water of the Wilderness is a priceless Minnesota asset, and now is the time to finally permanently protect this special place for future generations."

A 2017 [report](#) from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency characterized the waters in the Rainy River headwaters as "immaculate." The Rainy River headwaters is part of the Boundary Waters watershed where sulfide ore copper mining is proposed" A 2020 [study](#) on the recovery of a once polluted river in the watershed highlighted the threat posed by copper nickel mining.

Recent [polling](#) shows that nearly 70% of Minnesotans favor permanently protecting the Boundary Waters from sulfide-ore copper mining, and in 2017 over 180,000 people urged the federal government to withdraw the watershed of the Boundary Waters from the federal mining program.

This week the campaign will be highlighting the fragility of the clean water of the Wilderness through detailed mapping, peer-reviewed scientific studies, and adventure advocacy.

Sulfide-ore copper mining is considered the riskiest type of mining, with byproducts such as acid drainage, sulfates and sulfides, and heavy metals, all of which degrade water quality.

- **The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has deemed metal mining as the United States' most toxic industry.** Hard rock mining, most of which is metal-sulfide mining, contributes to more Superfund sites than any other activity. This is due to polluted mine drainage, a side effect of mining rock with significant metal-sulfide content. ([Environmental Protection Agency, April 2020](#))
- **Sulfide-ore copper mining is much more toxic than Minnesota's taconite mining.** Mining of this ore body would produce giant waste piles that, when exposed to air and water, leach sulfuric acid, heavy metals, sulfates, and sulfide. These byproducts pollute not just land, air, and soil, but groundwater, wetlands, rivers, and lakes as well. ([Minerals Engineering, May 2000](#))

Pollution from the proposed Twin Metals mine would flow into the Boundary Waters Wilderness, causing irreparable harm.

- **Pollution from these mines will inevitably flow directly into the heart of the Boundary Waters.** Peer-reviewed research shows that pollution from a mine in this watershed, like Twin Metals, even under normal mining operations, would generate contaminants that would flow directly into the Wilderness. This type of mine can generate pollution lasting more than 500 years. ([Journal of Hydrology, February 2016](#)) // ([Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 2013](#))
- **Because of the Boundary Waters' interconnected groundwater, wetlands, and abundant lakes and streams, the area is especially vulnerable.** The

many streams, wetlands, lakes, and aquifers downstream of the proposed mine sites are massively interconnected. Consequently, contamination would be widespread, and damage from an accident would be uncontrollable.

[\(Earthworks, 2018\)](#)

- **The U.S. Forest Service concluded that a sulfide-ore copper mine, specifically Twin Metals, poses an “unacceptable risk of irreparable harm” to the Boundary Waters.** Antofagasta, the company that owns Twin Metals, is proposing to store over a hundred million tons of toxic waste on the shores of Birch Lake, which flows directly into the Wilderness. [\(United States Forest Service, 2016\)](#)
- **There exists no technology today or envisioned tomorrow that can guarantee protection of downstream waters from sulfide-ore copper mining.** A review of state-of-the-art technologies available to modern copper mine construction found that none could eliminate risk to downstream waters. [\(Center for Science in Public Participation, November 2014\)](#)

History shows that sulfide-ore copper mining is especially prone to accidents that release pollution into watersheds.

- **93% of copper mines in the U.S. have experienced a spill or accidental release.** A study of 15 sulfide-ore copper mines in the United States – representing 99% of current U.S. copper production – found that 14 (93%) experienced accidental releases of pollution that resulted in significant water contamination. [\(Earthworks, May 2019\)](#)
- **In 2014, an accident at the Mount Polley copper and gold mine in British Columbia released 4.5 million cubic meters of toxic slurry into a lake and river system,** which was a priceless salmon spawning area and tourism generator. [\(Earthworks, February 2015\)](#)
- **In 2014, a mine in Mexico spilled 40,000 cubic meters of copper sulfate acid solution into two rivers,** wiping out the water supply for a vast rural area that depended on the river water for domestic use and agriculture. [\(AP, August 2014\)](#)

[100 days to Save the Boundary Waters](#) is a multi-week campaign to demonstrate to policymakers the overwhelming support to permanently protect the Boundary Waters Wilderness from the threat of sulfide-ore copper mining. The campaign consists of press events, videos, supporter actions, and more featuring voices from Minnesota and across the country of people that depend on the Boundary Waters for their livelihood, recreation, and clean water.

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