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Boundary Waters sacred to Midwesterners. Mine would be devastating to wilderness | Opinion

Why would we risk the clean water, wildlife, and recreation economy of the Boundary Waters for the short-term profits of a foreign company?

Mike Dombeck Special to Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

- The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, located in Minnesota, is under threat from a proposed copper mine.
- The Trump Administration plans to revoke a mineral ban on federal lands near the Boundary Waters, potentially allowing the mine to proceed.
- This action is opposed by many, including the author, a former Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, who cites the risk of pollution to the freshwater ecosystem.

I am among the many Wisconsinites who drive to neighboring Minnesota to paddle, fish, hike, camp or simply enjoy the [Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness](#) in the Superior National Forest. For decades, generations of Wisconsin families have [made memories there](#) — scout trips, church retreats, honeymoons, family reunions, solo paddles, and bucket list adventures.

The stories are endless, and the connection runs deep. The Boundary Waters is as sacred to Midwesterners as the Grand Canyon is to South westerners and all citizens of this nation.

The Boundary Waters is once again in the crosshairs of those who would desecrate it in the name of short-term economic gain — mining interests. This time, it's the

Trump Administration, which would break [longstanding protocols](#) to make it happen.

As a former northern Wisconsin fishing guide and retired Chief of the U.S. Forest Service and Director of the Bureau of Land Management, I believe deeply in our responsibility to protect the places that define who we are. Today, that responsibility includes standing up for one of the most beloved and threatened wild places in America: the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

America's great wilderness isn't out west, it's in Midwest

While many think of America's great wilderness areas as places out West, one of the wildest, most iconic, and most visited wilderness areas in the nation is right here in the Midwest. The Boundary Waters, in northeastern Minnesota, spans 1.1 million acres and includes over 1,200 interconnected lakes. It is part of the Superior National Forest and adjoins Voyageurs National Park and Canada's Quetico Provincial Park — together forming a more than 4-million-acre refuge for bald eagles, moose, and countless other species.

But now this place of pristine land and precious water is in real danger. A proposed copper mine, backed by a Chilean mining conglomerate, is slated for public lands immediately upstream of the Boundary Waters. This type of mining is well known for its toxic legacy. Acid mine drainage and heavy metal pollution would flow into one of the largest intact freshwater systems in the world — a system that cannot be replaced once contaminated.

Why would we risk the clean water, wildlife, and recreation economy of the Boundary Waters for the short-term profits of a foreign company? That's a question everyone should be asking—and one our elected leaders must answer.

Trump Administration intends to revoke mineral ban on federal lands

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins recently announced that she and Interior Secretary Doug Burgum intend to revoke the [existing mineral ban](#) on federal lands in the headwaters of the [Boundary Waters](#). Such a move would be unprecedented and would strip away critical, scientifically-based, and highly popular protections for the canoe country.

Wisconsin's elected officials are needed to help stop this give away of public lands to a foreign mining company by Congress and by the Trump administration. The Boundary Waters need us now.

This is not a partisan issue. It's about clean water, outdoor heritage, and protecting the places that shape who we are. As President Theodore Roosevelt said on May 3, 1903, while pleading for the protection of the Grand Canyon; *"Leave it as it is. You can not improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it. What you can do is to keep it for your children, your children's children, and for all who come after you, as one of the great sights which every American if he can travel at all should see."*

I suspect this is what he would be saying today to protect the Boundary Waters.

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