



On June 23, 2022, the U.S. Forest Service released to the public the draft Rainy River Withdrawal Assessment (EA), which analyzes the environmental impact of a 20-year mining ban on 225,504 acres of Superior National Forest lands in the headwaters of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The EA summarizes 20 resource reports that covered many areas of concern. The EA and its underlying reports document the significant risks that sulfide-ore copper mining in the Boundary Waters headwaters would pose to the Wilderness.

The EA explains that the purpose of the proposed 20-year mining ban is to protect and preserve natural and cultural resources in the watershed, including the Boundary Waters, the adjoining Mining Protection Area, and 1854 Ceded Territory, from the known and potential adverse environmental impacts arising from exploration and development of federally owned minerals. The resources to be protected and preserved are water quality, scenic integrity, important wildlife corridors, and high-quality recreation values. It notes that the Boundary Waters is a complex and interconnected ecosystem that offers recreational opportunities and other uses such that it is considered an irreplaceable national treasure. This treasure would be at severe risk from sulfide-ore copper mining.

The EA identifies risks of sulfide-ore copper mining:

- Mining of sulfide-bearing ore poses risks because of contamination resulting from accidents, spills, and failures of technology that could last centuries or longer (into perpetuity).
- Remediation technologies have limited effectiveness.
- Dry stack tailings storage facilities can harm the environment.
- Routine operations and failures of sulfide-ore copper mines could have significant negative impacts to aquatic systems and public health. It is likely that sulfide-ore mining would contribute sulfate to Birch Lake and downstream lakes, increasing methylation of mercury (harming fisheries and human health).
- Wilderness qualities and values and the recreation experience would be degraded.
- The low-income population of the three-county Boundary Waters region and the Native American community would bear the greatest risk of harm. These risks to environmental justice communities would persist indefinitely.
- 1854 Treaty resources, including wild rice, are likely to be adversely affected or permanently removed.
- Federally protected wildlife is likely to be adversely affected.
- In an ecosystem already stressed by climate change, sulfide-ore copper mining would cause the loss of additional forested lands and result in new sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

The EA notes that the current amenity-based economy of the Boundary Waters region would be protected by a 20-year mining ban.

A mining ban on lands in the headwaters of the Boundary Waters is prudent and wise. Fortunately, nearly 70% of Minnesotans agree.