

OPINION



The proposed Twin Metals copper-nickel mine near Ely unambiguously threatens the waters of the BWCA and beyond — waters that aren't just meant to be kept pristine but that are particularly sensitive to pollutants. Evidence that regulatory processes can help matters has grown slim. Some mining should be acceptable to Minnesotans, but ...

Not this mine. Not this location.

By Editorial Board Star Tribune NOVEMBER 23, 2019 — 12:35PM

BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA WILDERNESS, Minn.

David Meyer's parents took him to northeastern Minnesota's canoe country in the 1970s. This year, it was his turn to introduce his daughter, Theresa, 9, and his wife, Molly, to the quiet forests and shimmering web of waterways that had made such a lasting impression on him.

Two portages and some easy paddling brought the Roseville family's canoe to North Hegman Lake's pictographs. The July sunlight's gilding of the pines and water captivated Molly. Theresa gazed at the red wildlife renderings left by an ancient artist on the lake's steep rock walls. While no one knows why they're there, Theresa had an idea. "The moose one might have been

communicating something to other people who came back here, that these are good moose hunting grounds. I think that might be what it says.”

David Meyer simply soaked in the pleasure of being here with his family. “We wouldn’t have gotten this experience anywhere else,” he said. “I wanted to share this with them and see that it’s still here.”

Whether this one-of-a-kind wilderness will remain unspoiled for Theresa and other kids to enjoy with their own families someday is in serious doubt. Antofagasta, a Chilean mining conglomerate, has proposed opening a copper-nickel mine just a few miles from the BWCA itself. The 20,000-ton-per-day operation would be perched on the edge of a lake that drains into the wilderness watershed, potentially allowing pollutants from a type of mining new to Minnesota, one with an abysmal pollution track record, to enter uniquely fragile waters.

The debate in Minnesota and Washington, D.C., is intensifying as the project, known as Twin Metals, moves toward releasing a formal mine plan before the year’s end. As the public weighs these new details, its overriding concern must be meeting its solemn obligation to future generations.

Minnesota’s own wilderness philosopher Sigurd Olson and legions of conservationists worked for decades to permanently protect this delicate ecosystem, with their persistence culminating in the 1978 Boundary Waters Canoe Act. The modest ask of current generations: to pass on a wilderness as pristine as when we inherited it. That doesn’t mean opposing all mining in Minnesota, but it does require saying no to this mine at this location. The BWCA is not a place to try to manage pollution risks; it is where risk must be rejected altogether.



BOB KING FOR THE STAR TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

Jason Zabokrtsky, a wilderness guide and owner of Ely Outfitting Company, offers a variety of services for campers headed for the BWCA. The proposed Twin Metals copper-nickel mining project “is a risk and real threat to our economy and the wilderness that we love,” he said. Nonetheless, opinions about the mine are divided in Ely. Others point to the 700 jobs it is projected to create.

A world-class wilderness

Even a short canoe trip showcases the beauty of this 1.1-million-acre wilderness. On Hegman Lake, the canoers’ cameras are soon drawn from the pictographs to the lichen-splattered rocks, silvery tufts of caribou moss and a floating bog sturdy enough to step on. A closer look at the shoreline reveals a surprising find: carnivorous purple pitcher plants. Muddy tracks hint at bigger attractions — the moose, wolves and other iconic wildlife finding refuge here as habitat shrinks elsewhere in the state.

From the air, on a summer afternoon, the green of the forests and the blue of the lakes glow like gemstones. One sees the connectedness of this water-world — close to 2,000 lakes and more than 1,200 miles of canoe trails, natural highways that brought explorers and fur traders to the continent’s interior.

The watery network sprawls across the international border. In Canadian airspace, the wilderness below becomes Quetico Provincial Park. Its 1.2 million acres also lie within the vulnerable BWCA watershed that Twin Metals could endanger if approved. The same holds true for another preserve to the west, Minnesota's 218,000-acre Voyageurs National Park.

Minnesotans often think of the BWCA as a regional attraction. The reality is that it's a world-class preserve offering an experience that the nation's marquee parks in the arid American West cannot rival. Visitors come from across the nation and around the globe. In 2018, just one small Minnesota business, Ely Outfitting Company, served customers from 45 states and eight countries, according to proprietor Jason Zabokrtsky.

Resources in demand

The state's arrowhead is world-famous not just for majestic beauty but also for mineral bounty — the planet's second-largest copper deposit and third-largest nickel deposit. Twin Metals and another proposed mine, PolyMet, which plans to operate on a former iron mine site about an hour south of Ely, are likely the first wave of companies seeking to extract this treasure.

But not every area rich in minerals should be mined. That's not just the position of the Star Tribune Editorial Board or the environmental groups fighting to protect the BWCA. The Trump administration and Congress decided recently that metal mining is too risky to be allowed on public lands near Yellowstone National Park in Montana and near Washington state's North Cascades National Park. Former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke had recommended long-term mining protections for 30,000 acres near Yellowstone. This spring, Congress made those protections permanent and did the same for 340,000 acres around the Washington park.

The administration had a chance to expand the mining buffer zone around the BWCA in the same way. Instead, it removed a critical hurdle blocking Twin Metals' path forward, and in doing so sent a contemptible message: that the Minnesota wilderness is less worthy of protecting than the other two parks.

Twin Metals officials and supporters argue that there's a vigorous review and permitting process in place to determine whether metals can be extracted responsibly in this location. Another frequently heard objection: that the debate over Twin Metals is premature before the approval process begins.



BOB KING FOR THE STAR TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

Two copper-nickel mines are proposed in northeastern Minnesota. PolyMet would operate on the old LTV site near Hoyt Lakes, where mining has already taken place for decades.

But the process merits the public's skepticism, not its confidence. Consider the controversy over PolyMet. Earlier this year, leaked information suggested that state and federal officials deliberately kept critical information about the project out of the public record, a revelation that casts doubt not just on PolyMet but on all Minnesota mining projects.

Another reason is the Trump administration's handling of Twin Metals. Clearing the regulatory path for the project has been a curious priority for the administration. In September 2018, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue reversed an Obama-era decision to move toward a long-term moratorium on 234,000 public acres around the wilderness. As part of that decision, Perdue abruptly shut down a nearly completed two-year study of mining's risks to the BWCA watershed.

That decision came roughly two months after President Donald Trump enthusiastically threw his support behind copper mining during a summer visit to northern Minnesota's Eighth Congressional District, a political battleground he needs to win to achieve a goal he's repeatedly stated: turning Minnesota Republican-red.

Perdue has since blown off requests from Congress, environmental advocates and the Editorial Board to release the data already gathered on the BWCA. The timing of the decision and the stonewalling on the data strongly suggest that politics, not science, is driving Twin Metals forward.

Questions of trust

Doubt is further sown by Trump's choice to lead the U.S. Department of the Interior — David Bernhardt, a former oil and gas industry lobbyist. Interior, along with the Department of Agriculture is involved with decisions on the leases Twin Metals needs. Interior's inspector general office opened an ethics probe of Bernhardt soon after he took the job earlier this year. Among the allegations: that he had blocked the release of a scientific report detailing a pesticide's harmful effects, according to the New York Times analysis.

The regulatory process is clearly broken. As the Editorial Board has previously argued, Gov. Tim Walz should order the state Department of Natural Resources and the Pollution Control Agency to suspend permitting work on the project because neither the actions nor the actors involved in Twin Metals decisionmaking are trustworthy. A Friday announcement by the Walz administration that the DNR will further scrutinize Twin Metals is not a substitute for this executive action. Or, for that matter, a [similar legislative or congressional remedy](#). Half-measures won't protect the wilderness.

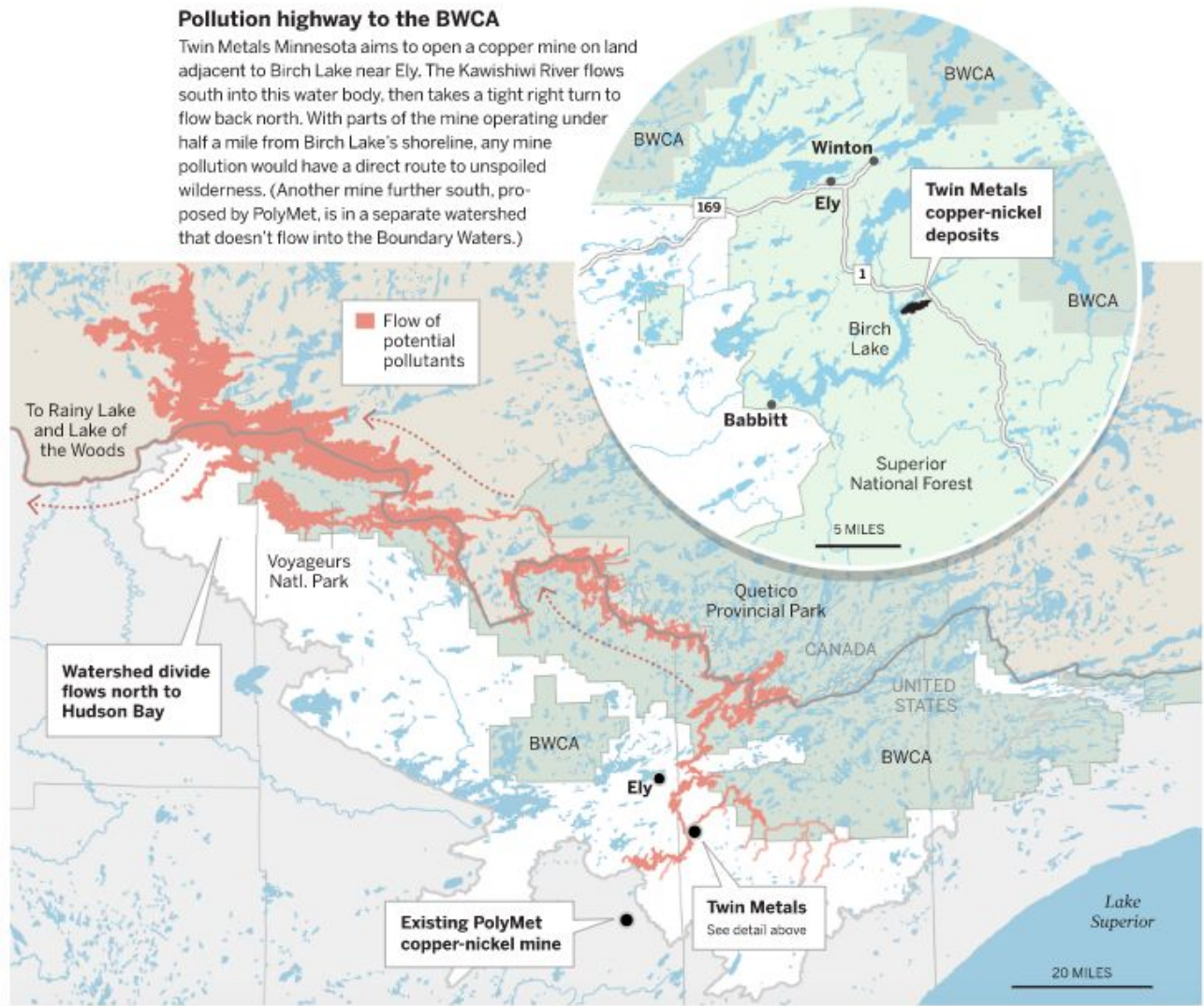
The track record of the mine's owners also does not inspire confidence. A 2010 report by a Chilean nonprofit states that an Antofagasta-owned mine has "the biggest amount of toxic spills into the waters in the Region of Coquimbo," with the most "devastating" incident involving a 2009 spill of copper concentrate into the Choapa River.

Mining companies' massive need for water also has exacerbated water shortages in Chile's arid north. Minnesota's wet climate is likely a feature, not a bug, for Antofagasta, which plans to withdraw between 300,000 and 600,000 gallons a day from Birch Lake. If Antofagasta isn't a responsible steward of water resources in Chile, why would it be in Minnesota?

Payments from Antofagasta to a former Chilean president's chief of staff were at the heart of a 2015 ethics scandal that led to the official's resignation. That background is one reason it's difficult to consider it a mere coincidence that a member of Antofagasta's controlling family just happens to own the Washington, D.C., home that presidential daughter and adviser Ivanka Trump now rents.

Pollution highway to the BWCA

Twin Metals Minnesota aims to open a copper mine on land adjacent to Birch Lake near Ely. The Kawishiwi River flows south into this water body, then takes a tight right turn to flow back north. With parts of the mine operating under half a mile from Birch Lake's shoreline, any mine pollution would have a direct route to unspoiled wilderness. (Another mine further south, proposed by PolyMet, is in a separate watershed that doesn't flow into the Boundary Waters.)



A particularly precarious setting

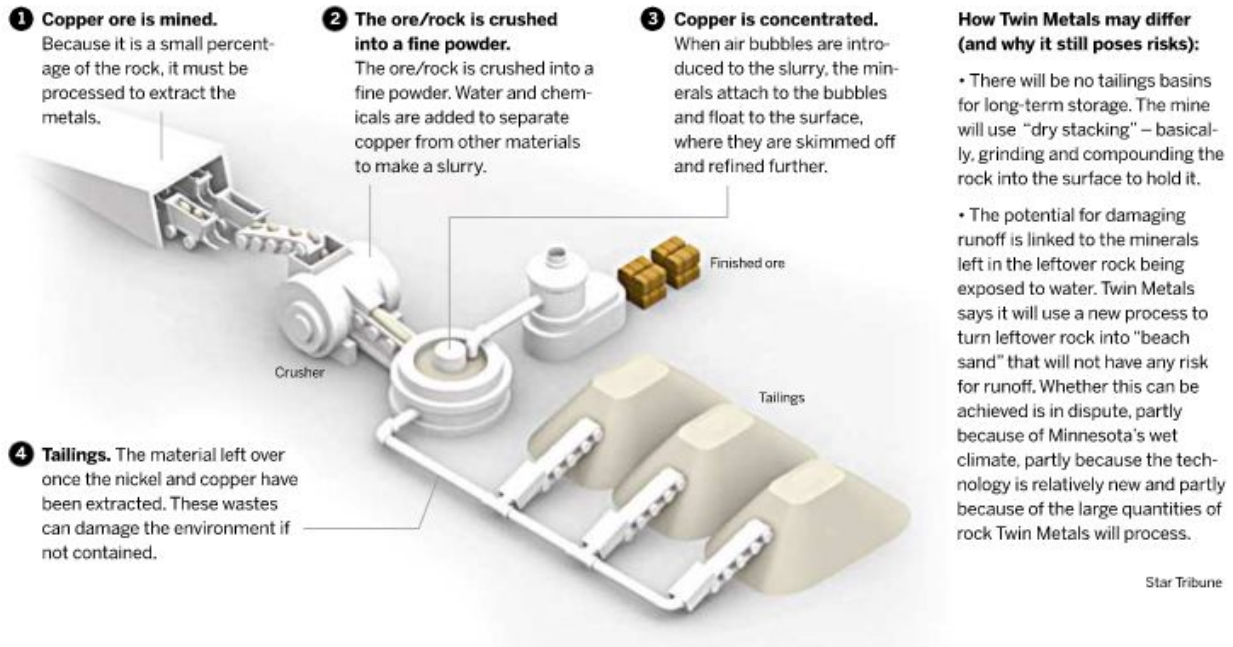
The reality that must be made clear is something that neither industry opponents nor proponents want to hear: There are places where this type of mining's impact may be manageable, and there are places where it's not. The recent irregularities in the permitting process have raised serious questions about whether PolyMet belongs in the first group. It's indisputable that Twin Metals lies within the second. The list of reasons is long:

- Location. Unlike PolyMet, which would use an existing mine site outside the BWCA watershed, Twin Metals would operate in a mostly undeveloped forest bordering Birch Lake, a reservoir whose waters flow north into the BWCA. The ore-processing facility would be less than half a mile from the shoreline, and up to half of its leftover rock would be stored on the site's surface. Minnesota's wet climate exacerbates the challenges of preventing the natural chemical interactions between leftover rock and water that lead to runoff.

- Fragile waters. Calcium and other minerals commonly found in water elsewhere act like a natural form of Maalox to counteract pollutants. But these “antacids” are lacking in the BWCA waters. Even minute amounts of pollution could cause unpredictable, outsized harm rippling through the entire ecosystem. “There’s no such thing as a little degradation,” said Brenda Halter, a U.S. Forest Service retiree who opposes Twin Metals.
- Ill-fitting regulations. The permitting process isn’t designed for mines next to places like the BWCA, where even allowable amounts of pollution could still cause irreparable damage. Nor does the process account for the difficulties of containing pollution in a wilderness or ensure that water quality standards will be enforced once the mine is running.
- A riskier type of mining. “A lot of the people taking comfort out of the fact that we’ve been mining in Minnesota for a long time aren’t realizing that this is a very different type of mine we’re talking about,” said Gene Merriam, who headed the state Department of Natural Resources under Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty. Copper mining uses different ore and processes and can yield a different pollution: acid mine drainage from the massive quantities of leftover rock, though Twin Metals officials say that technology can prevent acid runoff.
- Size. At 20,000 tons per day, Twin Metals would dwarf the other mines often pointed to as successful examples of the industry operating in a climate like Minnesota’s. The daily tonnage at Michigan’s Eagle Mine is 2,000. Quebec’s Goldcorp Eleonore Mine mines 7,000 tons a day. The difference in size raises serious questions about the scalability of the technology Twin Metals claims would prevent acid runoff and other pollution.
- Broader impact. Twin Metals would be an underground mine, but the facility would transform the surface into an industrial area, with the light, sounds and sights that come with it. The type of tailings storage Twin Metals plans to use is known for creating a pollutant called “fugitive dust” that contains heavy metals and other pollutants. That’s a concern when the operation would be just across the lake from an existing resort and camps, and a short drive (or hike) to the Little Gabbro Lake BWCA entry point, a popular spot for families and first-time visitors. Rather than add to local jobs, Twin Metals could cannibalize those dependent on tourism.

How a mine produces goods and waste

The plan for the proposed Twin Metals mine is under development. While details are expected to vary, the methods used by the much smaller Eagle Mine in Michigan show the general process for extracting copper and nickel:



The politics are also local

The site of the proposed Twin Metals mine is roughly 10 miles south of Ely, a small town at the western edge of the BWCA and on the eastern edge of the state’s Iron Range, where iron ore has been mined for over a century. Pro-mining yard signs along Ely’s main thoroughfare vie with outfitters’ amber-colored Kevlar canoes for visitors’ attention. The visual clash illustrates the tension over the direction in which the region’s future lies.

To mining proponents such as Ely Mayor Chuck Novak and Andrea Zupancich, mayor of nearby Babbitt, the issue is simple. They see a dying region in need of jobs, and not just those that tourism provides. Hewing closely to Twin Metals talking points, they say that copper mining can be done safely and that the projected 700 jobs would resurrect the prosperity of the past, when iron mining dominated the region’s economy. Ely’s population peaked in the 1930s at more than 6,000 and now hovers at 3,300. Mining jobs in St. Louis County, where Ely is located, have declined from 12,000 in 1980 to about 3,000 in 2009.

Others in Ely, including Kara Polyner, a printing shop owner and former City Council member, dispute the mining-or-die scenario. There’s an alternate path forward, she says, a different economy that builds on successful businesses like that of Zabokrtsky the outfitter — pulling in new residents who can work remotely and appreciate the beauty here. “You can’t say we can have the past back, but we can have something different and it can be better,” Polyner said.

Previous generations of political leaders, regulators and citizens had the courage to take the long view, putting preservation before special interests. But neither the focus on jobs nor the in-your-face divide over copper mining — a local business denied service to a mining opponent who was with an editorial writer — would have surprised Sigurd Olson. The author and conservationist made his home in Ely until his death in 1982 and pushed for decades to preserve the area's canoe country, facing bitter opposition from those who sought to develop the area's natural resources. In 1978, during a field hearing held in Ely, he was hung in effigy.

One question remains

The wealthy Luksic family that controls Antofagasta doesn't work out of Ely, of course. Minnesotans like Dean DeBeltz, an Ely native who plays in the local golf league, and Julie Padilla, a Winona State graduate and a former legislative staffer, are the Chilean conglomerate's friendly local faces.

The Twin Metals headquarters lies a few blocks off Ely's downtown. It's a modern, multistory building decorated with elemental symbols from the periodic table. There are elaborate safety protocols for visitors, ones that even extend to parking, where drivers are required to back in instead of driving forward into spots to protect pedestrians.

A tour includes an impressive library of rock core samples and a trip out to scientific testing stations where the staff studies groundwater movement. There are also smooth assurances that modern technology would set this copper mine apart from others. Padilla, the chief regulatory officer, and the staff have clearly hosted many tours and can anticipate most questions.

So it's surprising that a simple query at the end of an editorial writer's interview seemed to catch Padilla off-guard: Can Twin Metals say there's zero risk to the BWCA? After a pause, Padilla responded, "That's not a fair question."

But Minnesotans shouldn't take any chances with the wilderness. Twin Metals won't be operating in a controlled setting, like a factory. It would be dealing with Mother Nature in one of the world's most extreme climates. Accidents happen, even with modern technology and good intentions. Whether the BWCA will stay pure and pollution-free is not only a fair question, it's the only one that matters.

About this editorial

Star Tribune opinion writer Jill Burcum wrote on behalf of the [Editorial Board](#), which operates separately from the newsroom. Burcum's research and reporting included state and federal open-records requests and dozens of interviews, including a week of on-the-ground reporting in Ely, Minn. Burcum, who joined the Star Tribune in 1998, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for her 2015 editorial project "[Separate and Unequal](#)" on underfunded Bureau of Indian Education schools.

Assistant commentary editor David Banks and editorial page editor Scott Gillespie also were involved in writing and production.

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