



Let's prevent irreparable harm to an irreplaceable wilderness area

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The nation's [most-visited wilderness area](#), the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota, faces the certain threat of toxic pollution from proposed copper sulfide mining in the headwaters of this popular paradise.

But thanks to a new bill introduced by Minnesota's Congresswoman [Betty McCollum](#), Congress has the opportunity to prevent that from happening.

The Boundary Waters Wilderness Protection and Pollution Prevention Act, [H.R. 5598](#), would permanently ban this form of mining in the headwaters of the Boundary Waters.

As Chief of the U.S. Forest Service in 2016, I oversaw an examination of scientific reports that considered the impact of sulfide-ore copper mining within this watershed. That was triggered by a request by the [Chilean mining firm Antofagasta](#) to renew mineral leases for its proposed Twin Metals mine.

[What we found](#) was that the mine would present a threat of irreparable damage to an irreplaceable resource. That makes sulfide-ore mining in the Boundary Waters watershed a very bad idea. That is why the Twin Metals leases were not renewed. Our concerns were so grave that the Forest Service also took the step to initiate the process for a 20-year ban on new prospecting permits and mineral leases on federal lands in this watershed, the maximum ban allowed under the agency's process.

Since then, the Trump administration's reckless push to [fast-track approvals](#) for this mine have made the need for protection more urgent. In the past three years, the Trump Administration has reinstated and renewed the expired leases, already being challenged in court.

The administration also [killed the scientific study](#) of the proposed ban that was well under way. It has refused to share with Congress or the public the reports and data that had been collected in this taxpayer-funded study. On top of that, the administration claimed the findings in the never-completed study justified the decision to cancel it.

Antofagasta suggests that its mine would somehow be different from other sulfide-ore mines.

The fact is sulfide-ore mines pollute. Sulfuric acid, sulfates, and dangerous heavy metals such as arsenic and mercury are an ever-present threat from waste rock, from tailings, and from the mine itself.

Tailings, whether dry stacked or submerged in a pond, are an ongoing source of pollution for hundreds of years after a mine has closed and the mining company has long since moved on. And this does not account for all the things that can go wrong in terms of spills or other major leaks — which we see reported from mining operations all too frequently.

With the Trump administration poised to go through a "review" process for Antofagasta's mine plan, some say let the process play out. But the administration's actions clearly call into question its ability to run an objective process. If the science had demonstrated that the copper mining did not endanger the Boundary Waters, the administration would have simply completed the study rather than burying the data.

For these reasons, congressional action to permanently ban mining in the headwaters of the Boundary Waters is the best remaining option to avert disaster and protect the Boundary Waters.

The Boundary Waters is one of the most valuable natural landscapes on earth. It has sparkling clean water and attracts hundreds of thousands of wilderness travelers and tourists. The Boundary Waters is also a bedrock of sustainable economic support for hundreds of local businesses and thousands of employees.

An industrial mining district in the Boundary Waters watershed would forever change the landscape, undercut the wilderness character of the Boundary Waters, and continuously produce pollution that would flow directly into the Wilderness. This is why we need a permanent ban on mining in the headwaters, as Congresswoman McCollum's legislation would provide.

During my 41-year career with the US Forest Service, we permitted sulfide-ore mines in some arid locations in other parts of the United States where the risks are far lower. We also protected special places. Our nation needs metals, but there are enough places to get those metals without forever damaging precious lands and waters like the Boundary Waters Wilderness.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage, for your children and your children's children. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance."

For generations, countless campers, paddlers, and youth groups have spent time canoeing deep into this vast, pristine publicly owned wilderness. Even those who have never had the chance to visit this wonderland should stand up and voice their support for protecting the Boundary Waters from mining pollution. The House and Senate should act swiftly to pass this bill into law.

Tom Tidwell worked for the U.S. Forest Service for 41 years and served as Chief from 2009 to 2017.

<https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/478716-lets-prevent-irreparable-harm-to-an-irreparable-wilderness-area>