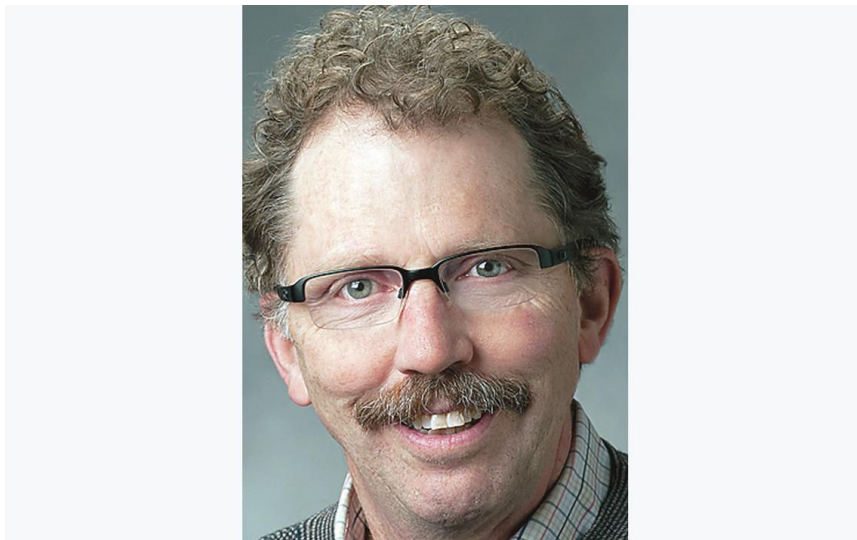


Commissioner's View Column: Finish mining study near Boundary Waters

Written By: Frank Jewell, St. Louis County Board | Nov 25th 2019 - 5am.



Frank Jewell

At its meeting Tuesday, the St. Louis County Board will vote on a misguided resolution condemning a provision in the U.S. House of Representatives Interior Appropriations Report that passed in June. The provision compels the completion of a two-year environmental study that was begun by the U.S. Forest Service in early 2017 but was abruptly halted by the Trump Administration after 20 months.

In December 2016 the Forest Service concluded that copper mining on national forest lands in the watershed containing the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness would risk degrading the quality of waters within the national forest and the Boundary Waters and could lead to damage that could not be fixed or mitigated. This conclusion followed several years of analysis, meetings with all stakeholders, and a public process that included two public meetings attended by 2,900 people and 74,000 comments from the American people.

As a consequence, the Forest Service study was undertaken to gather environmental, economic, and social data about a portion of the Superior National Forest near the Boundary

Waters, including the area where Twin Metals proposes to build a copper mine. The waters in this part of the forest flow into the Boundary Waters and then west to Voyageurs National Park.

Federal law recognizes that some locations should not be mined because they are too valuable or too vulnerable. Because the Forest Service determined the watershed containing the Boundary Waters was likely one such place, it followed the proper process for studying a possible 20-year ban of mining on 233,328 acres of federal lands.

I will vote against the resolution because I believe that a detailed scientific review of the area and of the possible effect of copper mining is essential. Further, the resolution is contrary to an express commitment by the St. Louis County Board — as voted Dec. 20, 2011 — to support “open, transparent and comprehensive environmental review” of copper nickel mining in the region.

This federal study is important because Minnesota state regulations will not protect the Boundary Waters. They allow water and air pollution, light and noise pollution, and the destruction of forests and wetlands. The rules do not protect high-value recreation waters. For example, the Minnesota standard for sulfate is 10 parts per million, or ppm. In Birch Lake, part of the Kawishiwi River system and near the proposed mine, it is 1.5 ppm. Allowing sulfate to reach the state standard would be a 650% increase in pollution in Birch Lake.

In its notice canceling the study, the Forest Service admitted it had completed a biological and economic-impact assessment and assessments of potential impacts to water resources, wilderness areas, and cultural resources. The Trump Administration has refused to provide any of these assessments to Congress and members of the American public. It is not a small group of elected folks who have requested this information. The group includes the chairs of three U.S. House Committees, Minnesota’s two senators, 14 House oversight committees, and numerous nonprofit groups.

The provision in the House Interior Appropriations Report requires the completion of the study and its delivery to Congress for review. Support for completion of the study is bipartisan. The study and the moratorium on decisions during the study do not affect any private, state, or county land; they apply only to national forest lands within the watershed of the Boundary Waters. The study should provide the best available science to support a decision on whether copper mining in the watershed poses an unacceptable risk of harm to the Boundary Waters, assuming the study is completed with integrity.

The Boundary Waters is an American treasure of clean water, vast forests, and rich wetlands. I believe that completing a study to ensure that the clean, natural quality of the Boundary Waters continues for our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren is the least we can do.

Frank Jewell of Duluth is the elected commissioner of District 1 on the St. Louis County Board.

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