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Testimony in opposition to H.R. 5598
House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
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Submitted by:
Jason George
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My thanks to the Chairman and members of the panel for allowing me this opportunity to testify today. My name is Jason George, I am the elected Business Manager and Financial Secretary for the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 49. We are a proud union of heavy equipment operators and other construction professionals, more than 14,000 members strong, that live and work in the states of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. Our members build and maintain the infrastructure of our region.

A large part of our work in Northern Minnesota involves servicing the existing taconite mines which have operated in this area for more than 130 years. Many hundreds of my members owe their living to the existence of the mining industry. And it's a good living. My members earn wages that are enough to raise a family. They earn a pension that guarantees them dignity in retirement. They earn privately funded and administered health care benefits for themselves and their families.

I am here to strongly oppose the passage of H.R. 5598 because I believe arbitrarily banning copper nickel mining activity in an area where mining is currently permitted will rob future generations of their chance at a good life and our local communities of their chance to thrive.

There are a lot of frustrating things about this bill and the movement to ban copper nickel mining in this region. But perhaps the thing that frustrates me the most is the fact that the people of Northeastern Minnesota are not being allowed to decide their own fate. Recent polling I've seen shows 67% of people in this region support the opportunity for copper nickel mining, 27% oppose. The resistance to mining, and the funding for the organizations that have been propped up to support this effort largely come from other communities, hundreds of miles away, from people that don't live where the mines are being proposed and don't know the facts about those proposals.

That's likely why the overwhelming majority of local elected officials that represent the area in question oppose Congresswoman McCollum's bill. I ask you to think about the people that actually live where these projects will be built when you vote. They want the opportunity to have

state and federal agency experts review specific projects that are proposed and make their own decisions as to whether they trust the project can be built safely.

This gets me to another point of frustration. This bill bans mining before there is even an opportunity to study an actual project proposal. I get it, I love the Boundary Waters too, most people in Minnesota do. But we can't let fear lead us to recklessly shut the door on opportunity without knowing the facts regarding specific projects.

In Minnesota we have the most rigorous mining permitting policies in the country. We have mined the area in question for more than 130 years and have been successful at protecting our lakes and streams, air quality and wildlife. There is no debate, Northern Minnesota has already proven that you can have industry and still have clean water.

This brings us back to jobs. A job is among the most important factors in our quality of life. The creation of a good paying job can improve the future of a family for generations. The elimination of a good paying job can do the opposite. I personally was raised by a single mother whose job was the only thing that prevented us from being homeless. That's why I fight so hard for people to have opportunities for good paying jobs, and it's why you should too.

You will be told about the thousands of great tourism jobs that you will be protecting if you pass this bill, and how the region needs to diversify their economy and tourism is the answer.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics the average yearly wage of a job in Northeastern Minnesota hospitality, which is tourism, is \$18,711. Most of these jobs don't come with benefits. The average wage of a member of my union is around \$60,000 per year, plus pension and healthcare and other benefits. I just have one question. How would you like to be told that you can't have a good paying union job, and that you should look into an \$18,000 a year job instead? That doesn't sit to well with people, and you should think about that.

What does the future look like for communities that rely on tourism without mining? You don't have to take anyone's word for it or read an academic paper. If you've been to Ely lately, a city within this region that hasn't had mining activity for some time, you'll see what the loss of those mining jobs has done to the community. The school is down to a graduating class of less than 40. Over the last few decades without mining the population has decreased. Stores are closing. All while tourism is thriving. Maybe that's why the Mayor of Ely strongly opposes this bill – because tourism isn't enough.

I want to close with what is the most offensive part of this bill. What it says to the people that live where these projects might happen. If you ban mining, without studying any specific project, without letting the people that live where these mines will be built even consider a project, what you are saying is you don't trust them to make their own decisions about their own communities.

I encourage you to let the people of the 8th district decide whether a mine in this region makes sense, and the only way to do that is to oppose this bill.

Thank you for your time today.