

CONGRESSWOMAN BETTY MCCOLLUM
Testimony on the *Boundary Waters Protection and Pollution Prevention Act*
(H.R. 5598)
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
February 5, 2020; 10:00 AM

Good morning:

Chairman Grijalva, Chairman Lowenthal,
Ranking Member Bishop, and Ranking Member Gosar.

I want to thank the Subcommittee for
the opportunity to testify on behalf of my bipartisan bill:
the *Boundary Waters Wilderness Protection and Pollution
Prevention Act – H.R. 5598*.

I want to thank Chairman Grijalva and Chair Lowenthal
for co-sponsoring the bill.

Along with my Republican co-sponsors
Rep. Francis Rooney of Florida and
Rep. Fred Upton of Michigan,
this demonstration of bipartisan leadership is significant.

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness
is part of the Superior National Forest
and represents 1.1 million acres of federally protected
wilderness in northeastern Minnesota.

The “Boundary Waters” or BWCA is the most visited wilderness area in the U.S., strengthening the local economy with a vibrant outdoor recreation and tourism industry.

With over 1,000 miles of canoe routes and nearly 2,000 pristine lakes the Boundary Waters is accessible, it is unique, it is fragile, and it is an American treasure that demands permanent protection from toxic mining.

This bill would permanently withdraw 234,000 acres of federal land from copper-sulfide ore mining in the Superior National Forest – lands abutting this million-acre wilderness.

This withdrawal is focused solely on federal land in the Rainy River Watershed which flows north into the Boundary Waters, into Voyageurs National Park, and into Ontario, Canada’s Quetico Provincial Park.

In 2016, after a comprehensive science-based analysis, the Forest Service informed the Bureau of Land Management that the toxic threat of copper-sulfide ore mining in the Rainy River Watershed posed an unacceptable threat to the wilderness.

In the Record of Decision, the Forest Service cited that “between twenty and fifty thousand mines currently generate acid on lands managed by the agency.”

While describing the devastating and often irreversible effects of acid mine drainage on fragile ecosystems, the Forest Service stated that:

“a review of water quality from 14 operating U.S. copper sulfide mines found: 100% of the mines experienced pipeline spills or accidental releases; 13 of 14 mines’ water collection and treatment systems failed to control contaminated mine seepage resulting in significant water quality impacts.”

BLM denied the renewal of two mineral leases under the control of Twin Metals Minnesota directly adjacent – literally footsteps away – from the BWCA.

Within weeks of the BLM's denial, the Forest Service filed an application to withdraw from mineral leasing 234,000 acres of Superior National Forest lands – the same lands addressed in this bill.

A two-year segregation study was initiated and the intent to prepare an EIS was noticed.

From the very beginning of the Trump administration, there was a determination to allow Twin Metals Minnesota – a subsidiary of a Chilean owned company (Antofagasta) – to extract profits, risk polluting federal waters, and ignore all environmental considerations.

In May 2017, at an appropriations hearing with the Secretary of Agriculture, the Interior-Environment subcommittee received a commitment from Sec. Perdue that the withdrawal segregation study would be completed and provided to Congress.

In 2018, the Trump administration not only reinstated Twin Metals expired leases, but Secretary Perdue canceled the application of withdrawal, terminated all public comment, and canceled the segregation study he promised to complete.

The taxpayer funded information from that nearly completed study has been denied to Congress despite numerous requests.

This begs the question: What information is being hidden?

The Trump administration is determined to permit not just one copper-sulfide ore mine in the Rainy River Watershed, but numerous mines.

There are 39 pending preference right lease and prospecting permit applications before BLM right now.

It is important to note that the Superior National Forest contains 20% of the fresh water supply in the entire National Forest System.

That fresh water – that precious resource – is at risk.

If one copper-sulfide ore mine goes forward in the Superior National Forest, let alone numerous mines, it will process tens of millions of tons of earth during its lifecycle.

One mistake, one failure, one design flaw means environmental disaster for this pristine and highly sensitive wilderness ecosystem. It could mean the death of a federally protected wilderness.

There is one more issue.

The 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty obligates the United States to protect the waters flowing across our border into Canada from pollution.

The potential of pollution from any mine in the Superior National Forest to pollute Canadian waters is a direct violation of the Boundary Waters Treaty.

Is any of this a risk worth taking?

The only way to ensure this place is protected for generations to come is to withdraw federal lands from sulfide-ore copper mining leases.

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness is a very special place – it is an irreplaceable treasure.

For today and for future generations the Boundary Waters must be protected because it is truly a precious natural resource that belongs to all Americans.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the time.