

Yes, use facts in BWCA debate

Rep. Pete Stauber should follow his own advice about not letting unsupported opinions on mining get in the way.

By **Editorial Board** Star Tribune **MAY 28, 2022 — 6:00PM**



An aerial view of River Point Resort on Birch Lake, not far from where the Twin Metals underground mine would be built.

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Our [continuing call](#) to stop a copper mine from opening on the edge of Minnesota's beloved Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness has put the Star Tribune Editorial Board at odds with U.S. House Rep. [Pete Stauber](#).

The Minnesota Republican is a zealous proponent of the proposed Twin Metals mine. But a Tuesday [congressional subcommittee hearing](#) yielded some common ground.

The hearing focused on a [bill](#) from [Rep. Betty McCollum](#), a Minnesota Democrat, that would permanently protect the BWCA from copper mining pollution. Unlike PolyMet, another proposed Minnesota copper mine, Twin Metals would operate within the BWCA's fragile watershed. The underground mine, plus its above-ground processing and waste storage operations, would be located alongside a lake with waters flowing into the BWCA.

Stauber, who didn't respond to a request for further comment, predictably led the charge against the bill at the hearing, warning about "disinformation" and opinions wrongly framed as fact. On that last point, the Editorial Board could not agree more. The debate over McCollum's worthy bill should be driven by facts and full context.

Next time, Stauber should follow his own advice. "Opinions framed as fact" at the hearing mostly came from him and the two GOP colleagues who helped carry water for [Antofagasta](#), the Chilean conglomerate controlling Twin Metals.

A cringe-inducing exchange between Rep. [Tom Tiffany](#), R-Wis., and Julia Ruelle, who represented [Kids for the Boundary Waters](#), is a good place to start clarifying. Ruelle testified movingly how BWCA visits helped her battle brain cancer.

Tiffany's response: a bizarre question posing a false either-or scenario. If Ruelle had to pick between producing copper in northern Minnesota or getting it via slave labor in China, he asked, which would she choose?

The Wisconsin congressman was likely less interested in the answer than in trying to make a point about copper's crucial renewable energy role. Yes, copper is vital. But the supply does not come down to Twin Metals vs. China, much less slave labor there.

The U.S. already mines copper domestically, primarily in arid Western states. It produced 1.2 million tons in 2020. The major sources for refined copper imports that year: Chile (59%); Canada (24%) and Mexico (11%), according to [federal statistics](#).

Other context necessitated by Tuesday's hearing:

- **Copper mined at Twin Metals would not be earmarked for U.S. use.** Mining proponents sometimes invoke national security and imply Twin Metals' output would be stamped "For America only." Instead, it would likely be shipped elsewhere (such as

China) for smelting and sold on the global market. The project's Chilean ownership also undermines the national security argument.

- **McCollum's bill strikes a reasonable balance.** Stauber implied on Tuesday that the bill would mortally wound Minnesota's mining tradition. In reality, it would employ a surgical approach to permanently ban risky sulfide-ore mining on fragile public lands at high risk of serious, even irreparable damage from pollution. The bill specifically says "sand, gravel, granite, iron ore and taconite" could still be permitted on the 234,238-acre area. Nor would the bill affect PolyMet, which is outside the BWCA watershed.
- **Minnesotans strongly support protecting the BWCA.** Stauber's pro-Twin Metals stance is at odds with a majority of Minnesotans. A 2020 Star Tribune [poll](#), for example, found that 60% of those surveyed statewide opposed building new mines near the BWCA. Even in northern Minnesota, 57% were opposed.
- **New paths to prosperity exist.** The remote work era means people can take high-paying jobs with them. They'll seek out areas rich in natural beauty and recreational opportunities. Ely's thriving outfitters give the area a running start. Copper mining would cut this off.
- **Mining isn't fail-safe.** Responsible oversight requires more than relying on Twin Metals' assurance that operations would "not negatively impact the Boundary Waters. It cannot by law, and it will not by design." A state Department of Natural Resources decision underscores the need for caution. In a [February letter](#), it said Twin Metals cannot use state lands for tailings disposal. Among the reasons: Doing so would pose an "unacceptable financial risk" (likely from potential cleanup costs).

The McCollum bill still needs a Senate companion. Minnesota's senators, Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith, should lead the charge. This week, the senators' offices said they'll wait on further action until completion of a federal environmental assessment — one halted by the Trump administration — of copper mining's risk to the BWCA watershed.

We urge the Biden administration to make those results publicly available as soon as possible to further ensure that facts, not half-truths, inform a debate foundational to Minnesota's future.

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