

United States Senate

March 26, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Secretary Haaland,

I am writing to ask that you direct the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to initiate a mineral segregation and withdrawal process to determine whether the copper-nickel-sulfide ore in the Rainy River Watershed in northeastern Minnesota can be safely mined and whether watershed protections are warranted. The evidence needed for such a determination would already be in hand if the Trump Administration had followed through on the previous two year review process that was abruptly cancelled in 2018. Given the prior efforts, I imagine that a new study could be completed in less than the two years allowed.

Mining is an essential part of who we are in northeastern Minnesota, and we are extremely proud that Minnesota's Iron Range produces the ore to make American-made primary steel. Our region is also home to rich non-ferrous copper-nickel-sulfide ore deposits. However, much of Minnesota's potential copper and nickel mining resources are located in the watershed of two Minnesota (and national) treasures -- the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) and Voyageurs National Park.

Minnesota's north county is also blessed with rich and precious water resources and a wild country tourist industry that is also an essential part of the regional economy and identity. Minnesotans care deeply about the Boundary Waters and Voyageurs, and the tourism these amazing places generate are an important regional economic engine. Additionally, these land and water resources have been important to our Native populations since long before Minnesota existed as a state.

When brought to the surface, sulfide ores create substantial and ongoing environmental risk, and the ecology of the watershed is known to be quite sensitive. We must weigh clear-headed science and comprehensive economic analysis as we decide how to proceed.

I became a Senator in January 2018. In June of that year, three months before the previous segregation and withdrawal period was ended early and without real explanation, I wrote to Trump Administration officials to request that they follow through on their initial commitment to completion of the study process. I wrote:

"Mining is an important tradition in northeastern Minnesota and an ongoing source of good jobs. At the same time, the BWCAW is a fragile and irreplaceable resource...The decision

making process regarding the proposed withdrawal must be through, complete, and unbiased—we as a country cannot afford to get this one wrong.”

I still feel the same way. I made no secret of my desire to see the 2017 study process completed. I traveled to Ely, on Minnesota’s Iron Range, in 2019 to explain my position directly to both copper mining proponents and opponents.

We must protect our precious wilderness. At the same time, we must pursue opportunities for both recycling and responsible mining of important mineral resources in the United States. If you believe—as I do—that the United States should lead the way in creating a clean energy future, then we must support public policy which allows for responsibly mining the minerals that this future requires. It is irresponsible and unethical to outsource exploitive labor practices and environmental degradation to other places while we reap the benefits. However, copper-nickel mining is not right for all places. There are some places too sensitive to mine. This is why we the mineral segregation and withdrawal study is so essential.

The miners on Minnesota’s Iron Range are the best in the world at what they do, and they have long depended on mining jobs to provide for their families and their communities. We owe it to all the people of the Minnesota to determine openly and transparently where it is safe and under what conditions it is appropriate to mine copper-nickel-sulfide deposits.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Tina Smith
United States Senate