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Dissenting view: Creating our own Appalachia means giving up too much

By: Marc Fink, For the News Tribune

Over the years we've seen, in the Appalachia region of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, what happens when a single industry becomes a sacred cow, supported by politicians across the spectrum for their own self interest and political survival. The end result has been tops literally blown off mountains, vanishing streams and continued poverty in local communities.

This scene, unfortunately, now seems to be playing out in Northeastern Minnesota as our local, state, and national politicians compete with each other to see who can offer the loudest support for corporations entering our state to strip-mine copper, nickel, and other metals from the Iron Range.

Lost in the politicians' rush to support this new type of mining in Minnesota is not only the horrid record of similar projects across the country, but facts disclosed in the just-released draft environmental review for the PolyMet proposal.

For instance, the proposed mine site is within the Superior National Forest, where an open pit strip mine is not even allowed. Instead of enforcing this provision to protect a public resource, the U.S. Forest Service entered into private negotiations for an exchange of national forest lands with PolyMet.

As I understand it, the proposed mine would directly destroy more than 850 acres of high-quality wetlands with more than 650 additional acres of wetlands indirectly impaired. The total wetlands impact would be more than 1,500 acres. And the vast majority of the required wetlands mitigation would occur outside the St. Louis River watershed.

Lakes and streams downstream of the proposed site already are impaired due to mercury pollution, prompting fish consumption advisories. The proposed mine could result in seepage of high sulfate concentrations, which, according to the draft analysis, could create "high risk situations" for mercury methylation. As explained in the analysis, methyl mercury is the "active form of mercury that accumulates in fish and is toxic to humans and wildlife." The proposed mine would place tailings on the former LTV tailings basin, which is unlined and already causing seepage to groundwater and surface water.

According to the experts of tribal cooperating agencies, water collection and treatment could be needed for 2,000 years to avoid further water-quality contamination. How do you factor that into any financial assurance from the mining company?

The PolyMet mine also could destroy nearly 1,500 acres of critical habitat for Canada lynx and wolves. Moreover, the project could affect two of only 13 remaining wildlife corridors across the Iron Range, with additional projects anticipated to affect nine of these corridors.

The mine is expected to generate nearly 400 million tons of waste rock and account for an annual carbon footprint of 767,648 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

The mine site is located within the 1854 Treaty Ceded Territory, where the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and Grand Portage Band of Chippewa retain hunting, fishing and gathering rights.

And PolyMet is just the first of a number of potential copper-nickel mines in Northeastern Minnesota, with our political leadership showing little restraint in its thirst for supporting this type of industry across the region.

If we commit to decades of additional and environmentally harmful mining, are we locking ourselves into a permanent resource-extraction economy - at the price of long-term pollution from Lake Superior to the Boundary Waters - while driving away other industry and points of view?

Too bad our politicians have apparently failed to ask this question.

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Our view: Minnesota can embrace PolyMet and copper mining

We're sitting on the third-largest nickel deposit in the world, with the potential to create thousands of construction jobs and hundreds of good-paying permanent positions.

PolyMet plans to develop a precious metals facility at the former LTV Steel Mining Co. site near Hoyt Lakes. (File)

A team of Iron Rangers has been working for years to bring "the next generation of mining" to Northeastern Minnesota. Under the name PolyMet, the team acquired a massive, long-idled processing plant. It lined up investors from around the world, spent more than \$20 million of the investors' money in preparations, and is now, it says, "in the late stages of the environmental review process."

A long-awaited draft environmental impact statement, more than four years in the making, was unveiled in October, a major step in making PolyMet a

long-needed reality. The statement explains how the mine can process copper, nickel, platinum and other valuable metals in accordance with strong state and federal environmental rules and regulations.

Public comments on the draft statement are being accepted even as Minnesota's U.S. senators and the region's representative in Congress and others in high places voice their strong support for PolyMet and copper mining.

The plan will be tweaked before final approval. The company then must apply for permits before this boon for our region can begin operations.

Iron ore has been mined from our region since the 19th century. PolyMet would be a different kind of mining. Copper, nickel, cobalt, palladium, platinum and gold are precious metals used to make everything from electronics to jewelry. Rich deposits have been found just south of the famed Mesabi Iron Range.

How rich? We're actually sitting on the third-largest nickel deposit in the world, with the potential to create thousands of construction jobs and hundreds of good-paying permanent positions. The industry could mean an economic impact in the hundreds of millions of dollars for

St. Louis County alone.

And not all of it from PolyMet. At least four more companies are poised to follow PolyMet's permitting and environmental-review lead.

At least 37 pages of laws and regulations are in place to monitor and to take care of environmental issues, including after mines close. The existing provisions even prevent the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources from issuing mining permits if precautions aren't taken.

"No additional restrictions are necessary," Frank Ongaro, executive director of Mining Minnesota, a coalition of copper-mining ventures, told the News Tribune earlier this year.

Two groups strongly opposed to copper mining are far removed from the Northland. The Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness group is based nowhere near the Boundary Waters, but in Minneapolis. And the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy is based in St. Paul.

Much of their concern has centered on sulfuric acid, which has run off at other copper mining operations, including ones in countries devoid of or nearly devoid of environmental laws and concerns. At those mines where acid runoff has been a problem, the sulfur content of the rock has been as high as 15 percent to 30 percent. The sulfur content of the rock at the PolyMet site is 1 percent or lower. It's negligible.

"There's no one more interested in doing this right than those of us who live here. This is our backyard," PolyMet President and Chief Executive

Officer Joseph Scipioni told members of the News Tribune editorial page during a visit this year to PolyMet. "This is not worth doing if we can't do it right. That's what the [environmental-review] process is all about."

An impressive and reassuring list of agencies and others are making sure PolyMet - and any companies that follow - will "do it right." The list includes the DNR, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency and three tribal governments.

The timing is right for copper mining. New technology allows precious metals to be recovered without smelters, the biggest culprit in the industry's dirty-air history.

In addition, PolyMet would bring back to life the former LTV taconite plant near Hoyt Lakes. The massive facility was one of the largest construction projects ever undertaken in the U.S. when it was built in the mid-1950s for \$350 million. That's \$2.7 billion in today's dollars. Closed in 2001, the facility's water tower, power plant, tailings ponds, grinders, crushers and other features and infrastructure all can be reused. And it would be a shame not to with opportunity presenting itself.

"This is an exciting project that's ready to add to the viability of this region" Ongaro said.

Added U.S. Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., in a letter of support to the DNR: "PolyMet will help diversify the economy of the iron ore-

dependent Range, and will help meet our nation's domestic demand for copper, nickel, platinum, cobalt, gold and palladium. Most importantly, this project offers a real opportunity to put Northeastern Minnesota

citizens back to work."

The economy continues to struggle. Despite the protests of a few, many others - including politicians, bureaucrats, regulators and everyday citizens eager for jobs and prosperity - are embracing and encouraging PolyMet and copper mining. They can all - from the Iron Range, from across Minnesota, and all the way to Washington, D.C. - continue to embrace and encourage a new industry being done right.

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