

Beware Hidden Costs of Mining Ventures

by Jane Reyer
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Last week, many of our state leaders were in Duluth to promote new mining in Northeastern Minnesota. That promotion includes tax breaks and millions of dollars in loans and grants from state coffers. We seem to have accepted without question what the mining industry would like us to believe -- that our only route to economic prosperity is to provide the industry with corporate welfare. But before we invest too heavily in the next round of mining development, we should consider what we are getting for our money.

Because mineral resources are finite, mining is an inherently unsustainable industry. Inevitably, a time will come for every mining community when mining will no longer provide employment.

PolyMet estimates that its NorthMet mine will employ 400 people and have a lifespan of 20 to 40 years. At the start, Babbitt will experience a "boom" of new construction, new residents, and new businesses. But what happens in 20 to 40 years, when the mine closes?

Although the taconite industry claims that taconite deposits will last another 200 years, the town of Hoyt Lakes has discovered that mining companies pull out whenever it suits their economic interests. Despite a recent estimate that the LTV mine could produce taconite at its 1999 rate for another 53 years, Cleveland Cliffs plans to close that mine within a year, and to step up production in Michigan's Upper Peninsula instead. The goal at one U.P. mine is to extract the ore as quickly as possible and be out by the year 2013. Like Minnesota, Michigan is more than willing to take additional jobs today, regardless of tomorrow's price.

Certainly the people of Hoyt Lakes need jobs, but does their best hope really lie with the very industry that left them in their current predicament? Rather than throwing more money at an unstable, unsustainable industry, the state should provide equivalent funding -- along with innovative training programs -- to develop small businesses that could diversify and stabilize the region's economy.

Gov. Jesse Ventura and other state leaders have also bought the line that mining can be done without significant harm to our health or environment. While we can find ways to better manage pollution, bringing heavy metals and other minerals out of the earth's crust and into the biosphere is inherently problematic.

Terry Gips of the Alliance for Sustainability explains why, based on a principle from *The Natural Step*: "Mining and burning of fossil fuels release a wide range of substances that do not go away, but rather, continue to build up and spread in our ecosphere. Nature has adapted over millions of years to specific amounts of these materials. Cells don't know how to handle significant amounts of lead, mercury, radioactive materials and other hazardous compounds from mining, often leading to learning disabilities, weakening of immune systems and improper development and functioning of the body."

The mercury that we have released to the biosphere through mining and the burning of fossil fuels has already reached levels that harm fish-eating animals like loons, mink, and otter. Current mercury levels also pose a significant health problem for our children. For most of the fish we eat, the Minnesota Department of Health recommends that young children and women of childbearing years limit consumption to one meal per month on an annual basis.

It is simply untrue that if an industry's pollution is within legal limits, it is not harming us or the environment. There are no legal limits for many pollutants that are highly toxic -- including mercury, asbestos and chromium, another metal released by mining and found at high levels on the Iron Range. Furthermore, legal limits that do exist are often set at arbitrary levels reached through a compromise between industry and public health. Many people, especially children, experience asthma and shortness of breath from particulate matter at levels that are within legal limits, levels that occur on the Iron Range.

Recent health trends indicate that children under 12 years old now face a one-in-two chance of contracting cancer in their lifetimes. While the minerals extraction and processing industry may be no more to blame than other industries, the National Wildlife Federation believes that it is time to depart from "business as usual" when permitting new industrial development. We need to change the products we use and the materials they are made of to eliminate the release of substances that so gravely affect our children's future.

Our Anishinabe citizens tell us that we should consider the well-being of the future seven generations in the actions that we take today. If we heeded their advice, we would turn our effort toward developing industries that do not poison our environment and are not dependant on a resource that will soon be gone.

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