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Capitol Report



Copper controversy

By Charley Shaw, Staff Writer
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Metro lawmakers want to impose new strictures on sulfide mines

A bill that would place additional financial and environmental requirements on sulfide mines in Minnesota is pitting Twin Cities legislators against the Iron Range delegation.

Rep. David Dill, DFL-Crane Lake, said a bill that was introduced Thursday would kill an emerging form of mining in Minnesota for nonferrous metals including copper and nickel.

"It's interesting that the folks that are authoring that bill don't live up there. We're the ones who have kept that water clean for many centuries," Dill said.

Sen. Jim Carlson, DFL-Eagan, said his bill would assure that taxpayers aren't left holding the bag for environmental clean-up if a copper mining company goes bankrupt and leaves.

"We want to make sure the area is protected, that the citizens are protected up there and that the citizens of Minnesota are protected from the cost to finish this up if the mining company walks away," Carlson said.

So far, Minnesota doesn't have any sulfide mines in operation. But the PolyMet company is in the advanced stages of pursuing a permit from the state to mine copper on the former LTV Steel Mining Co.'s taconite plant near Hoyt Lakes.

Carlson's proposal would require the commissioner of Department of Natural Resources (DNR), in consultation with other relevant state agencies, to come up with an estimated amount of money the state would need to close a mine. The state would require financial assurance from mining companies in forms that could include cash, letters of credit or bonds. The DNR would investigate each year whether the financial assurances are adequate.

Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, chief author of the House bill, said the measure is a compromise that stops short of a moratorium on sulfide mining in Minnesota. Wisconsin, she said, had problems with contamination and opted for a moratorium.

“What it’s not is a moratorium. ...I would say it’s safe mining,” Hausman said.

Dill, however, said the financial requirements would kill potential projects.

“If you want to buy a \$1 million house and you can afford a \$100,000 house, you’ve got a moratorium against buying a \$1 million house,” Dill said.

Hausman’s bill has been referred to the House Environment Policy and Oversight Committee.

In the Senate, Carlson’s bill was referred to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

Copper mining brings up sulfur-rich deposits. The sulfur becomes acidic when it is exposed to oxygen. If the acid is not treated, it can pollute lakes and streams and kill organisms in the water.

In addition to the financial assurance requirements, the bill would prohibit mines that need ongoing water treatment after they close.

Dill said the provisions about water treatment, like those requiring financial commitments, would effectively kill copper mining projects.

“If it says you can’t do that, then it’s a moratorium,” Dill said.

Rep. Tom Anzelc, DFL-Balsam Township, said he and other northern Minnesota legislators feel comfortable with the existing financial assurances and the rules that are established to permit a mine.

“Why would we knowingly and willingly risk our own water?” Anzelc said.

Anzelc’s northern Minnesota district has been hit hard by the downturn in the economy and layoffs at U.S. Steel’s taconite plant in Keewatin. But he said the need for jobs is balanced with environmental concerns.

But Carlson said he wants the laws backed up with an up-front financial commitment.

“If they close up their mine and they are not able to handle the reclamation or the mitigation of pollution, then these are false jobs,” Carlson said.