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## Local view: Land swap bill a bad deal for children, a good deal for mining companies

By: **Elanne Palcich**, Duluth News Tribune

In his May 24 commentary in the News Tribune (Congressman's View: "Preserve and protect BWCAW; return trust lands to students"), U.S. Rep. Chip Cravaack explained that about 86,000 acres of state-owned school trust lands are locked inside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and cannot generate money for the state school trust fund. He stated as his goal to "preserve and protect the Boundary Waters and allow state-owned school trust lands to raise revenue for Minnesota education."

Cravaack's op-ed needs some clarification.

Touted as a bill for our state's children, H.R. 5544, the Minnesota Education Investment and Employment Act, would exchange federal land in what is now Superior National Forest for state-owned land within the BWCAW.

First, the lands inside the BWCAW already are protected. That is why they cannot be logged, mined or leased. Lands withdrawn from Superior National Forest would lose watershed protection and prohibition against strip mining. (Note the proposed PolyMet mine requires a land exchange in order to open.) In addition, H.R. 5544 specifically would eliminate environmental review and public comment, thus ignoring cumulative impacts and citizen input.

Second, while facilitating the exchange of surface rights, H.R. 5544 would not resolve the nearly 100,000 acres of state mineral rights within the Boundary Waters. This would leave the door open for future negotiations that could further reduce the size of Superior National Forest while turning the Arrowhead into a sulfide-mining district. As summarized by State Rep. David Dill, D-Crane Lake, "We should mine, log and lease the hell out of that land that we get in the change."

To further complicate matters, most of the lands the state would get as part of an exchange have severed mineral estates held by private interests. Therefore, no money from mining these lands would go into the state school trust fund. Instead, private companies would be able to strip mine previously protected lands. While doing little for the monetary benefit of schoolchildren, H.R. 5544 would destroy the legacy of Superior National Forest and create a windfall for mining companies.

The Minnesota Education Investment and Employment Act is indeed a misnomer. Potential mining of low-grade, disseminated mineralization of the Arrowhead is speculative, based upon the costs of mining 99 percent waste rock. In addition, hard-rock mining uses heavy machinery rather than a large work force. Such mining would displace existing economic development, and the loss of current jobs in tourism, recreation, wood products and real estate would far outnumber the jobs added by mining. Those losses would be permanent. When mineral extraction is complete, remaining waste rock piles, open pits and tailings basins would diminish the use of the land for any other purpose. As is happening already, mineral exploration and the separation of land and mineral rights is decreasing private property values and could result in condemnation or seizure through eminent domain.

When an act of Congress must be disguised by its title, citizens need to take notice. H.R. 5544 is a give-away to multinational mining companies seeking to exploit Northeastern Minnesota. Citizens can contact our federal delegation, including Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, and oppose using our children to advance sulfide mining.

The best solution to state trust lands locked within the BWCAW is a complete sale of the lands to the federal government. Money is available through designated Land and Water Conservation Funds and could be immediately deposited in the Permanent School Fund. This solution preserves the natural heritage of the Arrowhead for the children of the future.

*Elanne Palcich of Chisholm is a board member of SOS Blue Waters, or Save Our Sky Blue Waters ([sosbluewater.org](http://sosbluewater.org)), a grassroots organization of Northeastern Minnesota activists and volunteers who oppose sulfide mining.*

Save Our Sky Blue Waters [www.sosbluewater.org](http://www.sosbluewater.org)