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Reader's view: Failure to regulate mining industry is disastrous

by Bob Tammen

The News Tribune's Sunday editorial, "Back off, St. Paul," deserves a skeptical response from someone who worked in the mines and lives on the Range. The time I spent working at the PolyMet plant site and several other mines on the Mesabi Range gave me experience apparently not available to the authors of the opinion piece. They wrote with good motives but bad information.

The first paragraph's reference to PolyMet as "a team of Iron Rangers" set the tone. My wife and I went to the PolyMet annual meeting last spring — in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. PolyMet is not a team of Iron Rangers. PolyMet is a Canadian penny stock and one of its main assets is the LTV site acquired for less than the cost of scrap.

The large picture that accompanied the article featured a tailings pond. It's my understanding that pond is leaking.

It's not just Twin Cities' legislators who care about pollution going into the St. Louis River. A good many News Tribune readers have been working for years to clean up the St. Louis Bay. They should be informed about where the pollution is coming from.

The plant site itself has been reported as having at least 60 pollution hotspots. A properly skeptical newspaper staff could easily make a call to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to verify that those sites have not been cleaned up.

The newspaper's claim that the sulfur content of the formation is negligible was misleading. Just Google "Dunka acid mine drainage." The Dunka operation disturbed the Duluth formation, which PolyMet intends to mine. The resulting pollution ran into Birch Lake a few miles south of Ely and still is not completely cleaned up after years of treatment.

Promoting PolyMet as a jobs-creation program while the mining industry is collapsing just accentuated the impotence of the economic development groups in northern Minnesota. At the precise time we need jobs offering diversification, we get the usual mining-company PR message.

Bashing out-of-town environmentalists is not going to solve our problems. Lead-contaminated grease barrels on the North Shore are a great example. It cost taxpayers millions to clean up the dump site at Silver Bay, and the MPCA acknowledged there are several more sites on the Range, perhaps even on the PolyMet site.

I remember seeing those barrels in the lube room when I did electrical work in the mines.

They ended up in a dump near the plant because my fellow employees, under the supervision of executives who supposedly cared about the environment, and regulated by the state of Minnesota, hauled them out and buried them.

Demonizing St. Paul legislators or Twin Cities' environmentalists doesn't change the truth. We were not good stewards and we still aren't. We have a precedent to judge the critics of environmental regulations.

For years we heard the rich and powerful criticize any attempt to impose financial regulations on banking executives. Now we see the painful results of our failure to regulate. What did failure to regulate do to retirement plans?

Now take a look at our failure to regulate the mining industry. We have leaking tailings ponds, mines operating on expired permits, destroyed wetlands, flooding pits, dirty air, polluted rivers and an economy held hostage to the mining industry. The Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board is taking millions of dollars that could be used for diversification and rebating mining companies.

During the last congressional session, Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Rep. Jim Oberstar, both Democrats from Minnesota, introduced a bill to sell 6,700 acres of the Superior National Forest to PolyMet. One of the finest resources in Minnesota is to be put up for sale to a Canadian penny stock mining company so it can open a mine that may very well require perpetual treatment.

This is not an issue of St. Paul vs. the Iron Range. This is an issue of the copper mining industry vs. all of Minnesota.

Instead of bashing legislators from the Twin Cities, the News Tribune could be investigating the mining company executives and state regulatory agencies that have allowed valuable ore to be hauled away while pits and piles and tailings ponds were left behind as a burden to taxpayers.

Bob Tammen lives in Soudan.