

Passage of Safe Mines Bill would protect the waters of Lake County and Lake Superior

**Lake County News Chronicle
Published Thursday, February 26, 2009**

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To the editor,

The “Safe Mines to Protect our Water” bill (SF0845/HF0916) was introduced in the Minnesota Legislature this past week. The bill would provide much needed improvements to the existing non-ferrous (copper-nickel) mining rules to protect our waters from mercury and toxic metal pollution. It would also require financial assurance from corporations that would prevent their walking away from polluted mining sites leaving the cleanup cost entirely up to the public.

Copper-nickel mining as currently planned would produce waste, sulfur-laden rock storage deposits that would threaten water quality in streams, lakes and wells in all of Northeastern Minnesota. Lake County would be among the first affected since the first proposed mines are located upstream in our watershed near popular inland lakes.

The legislation would require that a permit to mine will not be issued by the MnDNR if water treatment would be required after the mine’s closure. This stipulation would prevent passing pollution problems on to our children and grandchildren who would not be equipped to deal with the financial burden. Mercury and toxic metals are produced as polluted water leaches from the mine waste. If unborn and infant children are exposed to these pollutants, brain and nervous system damage has been shown to occur. State tax payers would have to fund health and special education costs for developmentally disabled children. Very expensive water treatment plants would be needed for communities fed by these streams and lakes to protect all residents. The need for more assisted living and general health clinics would follow. Preventing this potential calamity is mandatory.

In the event that a copper-nickel mine were permitted, the Bill requires significant improvements in the financial assurance required to guarantee safe closure of the mine.

No mining company has ever successfully controlled pollution from this kind of toxic time bomb of waste material from the mining and processing of non-ferrous sulfide rock. Although this bill is a needed improvement in current rules, the proposed financial assurance continues to deal with a public health problem that we would rather see avoided in the first place through first-class mining plans. The need for financial assurance should be limited to the restoration of wetlands, natural habitat and aesthetics to acceptable conditions. It would be impossible to fund perpetual treatment of polluted water escaping from copper-nickel mine waste storage pits.

No such safe mining plan has been presented to date. No mining company large enough to provide adequate financial assurance has stepped forward. Rivers, streams, lakes and private residences are all at risk in Lake County, not to mention St. Louis and Cook Counties.

And, of course, the final receiving water for most of the polluted runoff would eventually be Lake Superior. Its water quality would deteriorate further over the decades of pollution from the proposed copper nickel mines.

Save Lake Superior Association

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