

Legislation pursues tighter cleanup rules for Minnesota sulfide mines

Sulfides driving wastewater worries

By Dennis Lien

dlien@pioneerpress.com

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With a new type of mining being proposed for northern Minnesota, some state legislators want to impose tighter site-cleanup standards and financial assurance requirements.

Legislation introduced Thursday would force companies engaging in sulfide mining to make sure that their sites are clean and nonpolluting when they're done and that they've put enough money aside so taxpayers aren't on the hook for subsequent problems.

"Our intention is to make this kind of mining safe," said Sen. Jim Carlson, DFL-Eagan, chief sponsor of the Senate bill. Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, is the chief sponsor of a companion bill in the House.

During a legislative hearing on mining a year ago, Iron Range lawmakers opposed such requirements, contending that adequate precautions already were being taken and that much-needed jobs for the region are at stake.

At least two companies — PolyMet Mining and Franconia Minerals — are exploring mining for precious metals such as nickel and copper in an area southwest of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. In that process, sulfide material is extracted from the ground, raising the possibility that wastewater could become acidic and could leach into lakes and streams.

Environmental groups contend sulfide mining has caused widespread pollution in other states and has forced taxpayers to pay hundreds of millions of dollars in cleanup costs. Some states have responded by tightening standards.

Under the proposed legislation, permits could not be issued until the mining companies establish that no water cleanup will be needed after their operations close. In addition, the commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources, after talking with the finance commissioner and the head of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, would establish how much money companies would have to set aside to make sure their sites eventually are cleaned up. No hearing dates have been set.

Dennis Lien can be reached at 651-228-5588.