

# SAVE OUR SKY BLUE WATERS



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**[www.sosbluewater.org](http://www.sosbluewater.org)**

## **PolyMet Update**

November, 2013

The PolyMet (also referred to as “NorthMet”) open pit copper/nickel sulfide mine that is currently working its way through the permitting process would be Minnesota’s first to mine nonferrous, sulfide-bearing ore. The proposed mine would be located on what is currently Superior National Forest land between Babbitt and Aurora/Hoyt Lakes.

PolyMet Mining Company began the application process for a permit to mine several years ago. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers originally released the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for public review in November 2009, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency objected to the mine plan because wastewater discharges would not meet water quality standards. This effectively put the permitting process on hold and sent PolyMet back to the drawing board.

In the years since then there have been many false predictions that the next iteration of the Draft EIS (the “Supplemental Draft EIS” or “SDEIS”) would soon be out for public review. In November the MDNR announced that the release date of PolyMet's SDEIS will be **December 6, 2013**. A public comment period will begin at that time, including another round of public hearings. We do not yet know how long the comment period will be. The MDNR has said that there will be three public meetings to be held in the Twin Cities, Duluth and Aurora/Hoyt Lakes sometime in January. Exact times and locations will be announced later. Environmental organizations have requested a comment period of 180 days, with public hearings held in Duluth, Ely, and the Twin Cities.

The U.S. Forest Service has joined the Minnesota DNR and the Army Corps of Engineers as a lead agency in preparing the document. The regulatory agencies have made a preliminary draft of the SDEIS available to the public. It is referred to as the “PSDEIS”, and can be accessed at [www.friendscvsvf.org](http://www.friendscvsvf.org) (with thanks to the Friends of the Cloquet Valley State Forest). Some small changes may be made before the SDEIS is put on public notice, but our understanding is that the mine plan is essentially set and that no significant changes are likely.

We have not had time yet to study the document thoroughly and cannot provide a list of issues at this time. However, many of the reasons we opposed the project in 2009 have not changed:

**Destruction of Wetlands.** The preliminary draft of the SDEIS predicts that 912 acres of wetlands will be destroyed by filling or excavation, and up to 7,413 acres may be “indirectly” impacted. Indirect impacts include the conversion of wetlands to dry land due to mine dewatering, for which the plan provides no mitigation or replacement. “Mitigation” for the 912 acres of “direct” impacts will occur primarily outside of the St. Louis River/Lake Superior watershed, in an area to the south that is unlikely to support comparable ecosystems and (over)

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cannot replace the lost functions to the St. Louis River system. The entire mine site has been rated by the Minnesota Biological Survey as of “high biological diversity” and the wetlands are considered by the U.S. EPA to be of national importance “due to the values they provide in terms of unique habitat, biodiversity, downstream water quality and flood control specifically, to the Lake Superior Watershed and the Great Lakes Basin.” The mine site consists of more than 3,000 acres of land, forty percent of which are covered by ecosystems that the Minnesota Biological Survey considers imperiled or vulnerable (black spruce-jack pine woodlands and rich black-spruce swamp).

**The need for perpetual water treatment.** After the mine is closed, run-off from the site will be polluted and will need treatment for hundreds or even thousands of years. While PolyMet hopes to establish “passive” wetland treatment systems, even these systems will require continued human attention through the centuries. **Treatment is likely to be needed beyond the end of our current regulatory or monetary system.** We oppose passing such long-lasting environmental problems on to future generations that will not receive the benefit of the activity that caused them.

**Cumulative destruction of wildlife habitat.** The construction of new mines and expansion of the taconite industry as planned will destroy many miles of wildlife habitat. Wetlands are particularly important for moose, and most of the replacement wetlands that are intended to mitigate the ones that are lost will be located outside of moose territory. Furthermore, the stretch of mines in the Mesabi Range already provides a barrier to wildlife migration. The addition of new mines and the expansion of old ones will effectively block wildlife movement between the regions to the northwest and southeast of the Range.

**Negative impacts on the economy.** Metal prices are volatile, and the production of minerals is tied to price. Although mining jobs might be high-paying, they are not stable. Studies of mine-dependent communities indicate that they are almost always economically depressed. We do not want to see a mining “boom” bring hundreds of new workers and families to the Northland, only to have them and many of us sent reeling when copper prices drop.

**Federal land exchange.** Because the proposed mine site is on Forest Service land, a 6,650 acre land exchange is part of the proposal. The policy of exchanging Forest Service land for private lands to facilitate mining is counter to the whole idea of setting aside forested areas for the public. The lands that the Forest Service will receive do not appear to be threatened in any way, and it is unclear what benefit the public will receive by the transfer to public ownership, while the lands that the Forest Service gives up will be deforested. This type of trade will inevitably result in a reduction in total forested acreage and wildlife habitat.

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