

POLYMET COPPER SULFIDE MINE

Too Risky for Lake Superior Watershed



Photo of proposed PolyMet mine site courtesy Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy

Copper sulfide mining has never been attempted in Minnesota. PolyMet Mining Company's NorthMet proposal would be the first. This open-pit mine would destroy 1,000 acres of wetlands and more than 1,700 acres of critical wildlife habitat in northern Minnesota's Superior National Forest. It would risk releasing mercury and sulfuric acid into the headwaters of the St. Louis River, which flows into Lake Superior — site of 10 percent of the world's fresh surface water.

Tailings Dam Design Is Flawed. The 225 million tons of mine waste tailings would be piled on top of an existing tailings basin currently leaking millions of gallons a day of polluted water.¹ A 23-story tall earthen dam would hold back this mountain of toxic material.² In 2014 a mineral mine with a similar earthen tailing dam failed in British Columbia, Canada, releasing more than a billion gallons of contaminated waste into rivers and lakes.³ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources documents note the failure of the PolyMet tailing dam is probable over its life.

The state has asked for \$1 billion in financial assurances, in part to pay for the hundreds of years of water treatment that would be needed at the mine site and plant site.⁴ Yet PolyMet has proposed only \$544 million, creating a major financial risk to the state and local communities for future cleanup and maintenance costs.

¹ Final Environmental Impact Statement, NorthMet Mining Project and Land Exchange, Minn. Dep't of Nat. Res., U.S. Army Corps of Eng'rs, U.S. Forest Serv., 5-7 (Nov. 2015).

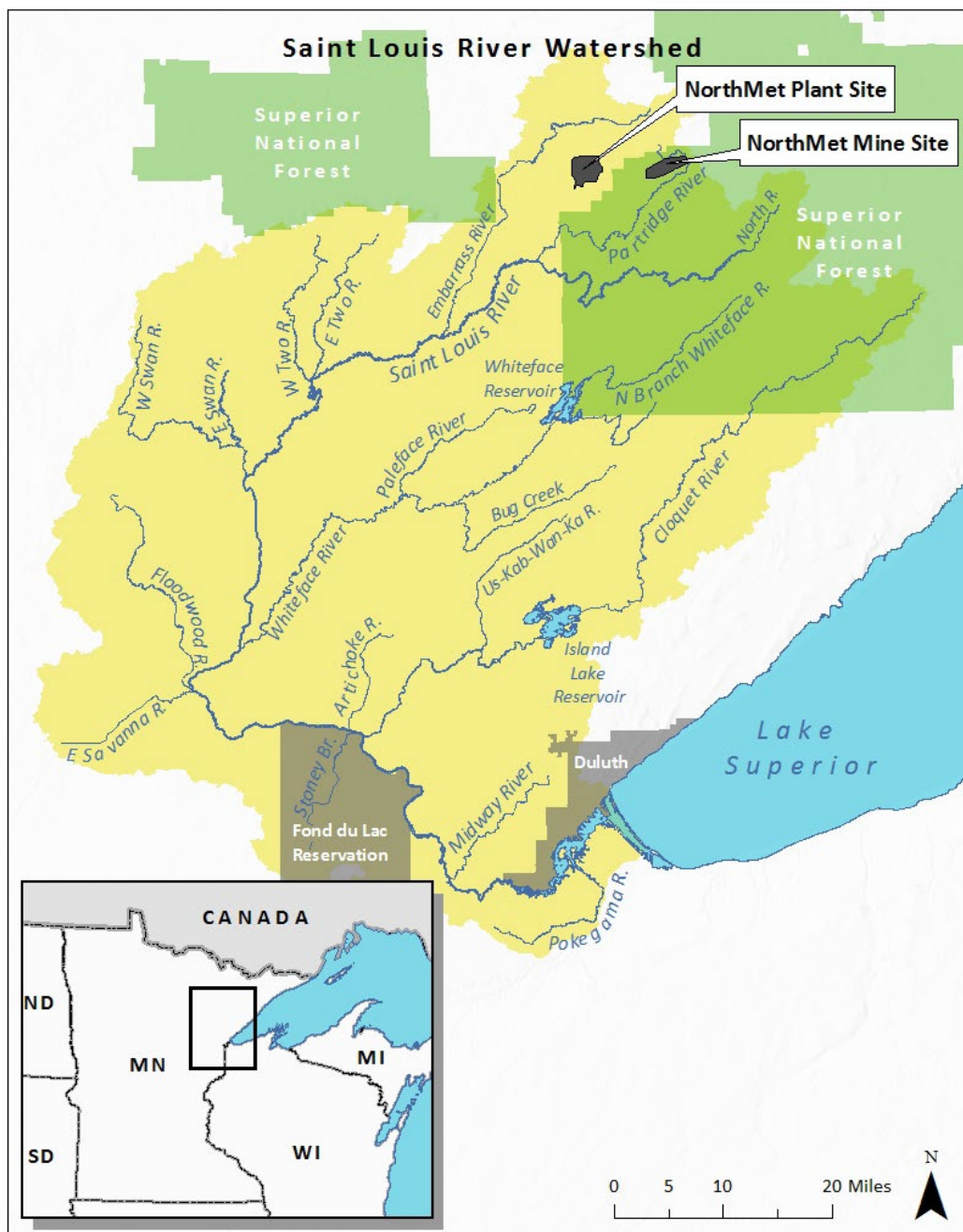
² Josephine Marcotty, Prospect of growth intensifies debate about PolyMet tailings dam, STAR TRIBUNE (Apr. 7, 2018), <http://www.startribune.com/prospect-of-growth-intensifies-debate-about-polymet-tailings-dam/479059143/>.

³ Mount Polley Mine tailings pond breach called environmental disaster, CBC NEWS (Aug. 4, 2014), <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/mount-polley-mine-tailings-pond-breach-called-environmental-disaster-1.2727171>.

⁴ Josephine Marcotty, PolyMet proposes \$544 million to cover Minnesota mine's early environmental risks, STAR TRIBUNE (Dec. 13, 2017), <http://www.startribune.com/polymet-proposes-over-600-million-to-cover-minnesota-mine-s-environmental-risks/463968593/>; Josephine Marcotty, State predicts PolyMet would need \$1B to cover risks from copper-nickel mine, STAR TRIBUNE (Dec. 20, 2017) <http://www.startribune.com/state-predicts-polymet-would-need-1b-to-cover-risks-from-copper-nickel-mine/465327373/>

Lawsuits Filed to Protect Wolves, Lynx From Copper Sulfide Mine. In 2017 environmental organizations challenged the U.S. Forest Service's approval of the land exchange with PolyMet in federal court, arguing that the Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service failed to properly consider the environmental impacts from the land exchange and copper mine on endangered wildlife species. The organizations also claim that the Forest Service significantly undervalued the lands to be exchanged by instructing its appraiser to ignore PolyMet's intended use as an open-pit copper mine when calculating the land value, only accounting for timber value.

Congress Should Not Interfere With Independent Judiciary. In response to litigation, Congressman Rick Nolan introduced, and the House passed, H.R. 3115, the Superior National Forest Land Exchange Act of 2017. The bill would circumvent the public's right to access the courts by legislating the land exchange with PolyMet. Forcing the contested land exchange, blocking citizen access to the courts and overriding our independent judiciary sets a dangerous precedent and is completely unacceptable. There is no companion bill in the Senate at this time.



Data Sources:
WaterLegacy, National Hydrography Dataset

Map by: K. Clauser, Center for Biological Diversity, 5/21/2018