

October __, 2018

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable James Hubbard
Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Vicki Christiansen
United States Forest Service Chief
201 14th Street SW, Suite 5NW
Mailstop 1106
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Perdue, Under Secretary Hubbard, and Chief Christiansen,

We, the undersigned conservation organizations and businesses, write to express our profound disappointment by the Department of Agriculture's recent actions to cancel the U.S. Forest Service's application for a withdrawal of 234,328 acres of Superior National Forest lands in the watershed of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness from mineral and geothermal leasing, and to open those lands to hardrock mineral leasing and mining. These actions also had the effect of terminating the ongoing public process and science-based review of the environmental, social, and economic impacts of proposed sulfide-ore copper mining in the watershed.

The proposed Superior National Forest mineral withdrawal would have protected four internationally significant – and vulnerable – public lands areas within the Rainy River/ Boundary Waters watershed. These four internationally significant areas – now threatened by sulfide-ore copper mining – are:

- The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, the most visited national wilderness area in America and the largest national wilderness area east of the Rockies and north of the Everglades;
- Voyageurs National Park, a lakeland national park;
- The Quetico Provincial Park, Ontario's wilderness park, adjacent to the Boundary Waters; and

- The Superior National Forest, including 220,000 acres in a Mining Protection Area, where federal law requires that water quality be protected from mining-caused degradation.

These important public lands consist of approximately 4.4 million acres of protected boreal forest and a vast network of interconnected lakes and rivers. The Superior National Forest alone contains twenty percent of all the freshwater in the entire 193-million-acre National Forest System. Its value to the American public as an intact healthy ecosystem far outweighs any possible short-term economic benefit of low-grade copper-nickel mining, a use that would instead result in the loss of one of America's great wild places and cause irreparable damage to an economic and social structure built around the unique and irreplaceable lakeland region.

Forest Service Chief Tidwell's decision of December 14, 2016 documented the high risk to the Boundary Waters and downstream protected areas should sulfide-ore copper mining proceed in the watershed of the Boundary Waters, and cited legal mandates to protect the areas from hardrock mining. This was the basis for the withdrawal application. The case – science and economics – has only grown stronger, and the need for protection even more compelling. The September 6, 2018 cancellation of the withdrawal application disregards the Forest Service's significant concerns – expressed in both the agency's 2016 denial of consent to the renewal of the Twin Metals leases and in its application for the proposed withdrawal – that sulfide-ore mining is not an appropriate activity in the watershed of the Boundary Waters. It also eliminates the public from involvement and goes against the will of the American people.

The preparation of an environmental assessment of the proposed mineral withdrawal was widely supported by Minnesotan elected officials, including Governor Dayton, Minnesota's two U.S. Senators, and four Minnesota Members of the U.S. House. The ranking GOP Member of the Minnesota U.S. House delegation has called on Secretary Perdue to reverse his decision and reinstate the application for a mineral withdrawal.

The public participated in the two-year environmental assessment process at levels previously unheard of in Minnesota. Over 177,000 persons (out of approximately 181,000 comments) urged a 20-year mineral withdrawal. More than 2,700 people attended three public meetings, and speakers, by a two-to-one margin, urged a 20-year ban. Multiple reports and studies, including peer-reviewed and published studies by the State of Minnesota, were submitted for consideration. Polling by conservative pollster Fabrizio Ward shows that 70% of Minnesota voters oppose copper mining near the Boundary Waters. All of this appears to have been ignored.

The Secretary's September 6, 2018 decision also ignores that sulfide-ore copper mining in the Boundary Waters watershed is a significant economic loser. The wild lands of the Boundary Waters, Voyageurs National Park, the Quetico, and the Superior National Forest are an important driver of the regional economy, with much of the economic infrastructure – businesses, resorts, outfitters, campgrounds, homes, wilderness entry points, and more – located in the Boundary Waters watershed. Proposals to transform this area to a sulfide-ore

copper mining district would displace local residents and many businesses, resulting in a potential loss of more than 27,000 jobs, \$1.4 billion in economic activity, and over \$500 million in lost property value in northeastern Minnesota. An independent August 2018 economic study by Harvard University Professor James Stock and a PhD graduate student compared the existing Boundary Waters economy to a Twin Metals mining economy using 36 employment and 72 income scenarios. The conservative study – which did not look at lost property values or environmental damage – showed a 96% likelihood that protecting the existing Boundary Waters economy by prohibiting sulfide-ore copper mining in the watershed would result in more jobs (up to 4,600) and more income (up to \$900 million) than a Twin Metals copper mine (69 out of 72 income scenarios). In contrast, a 2012 University of Minnesota economic study cited by pro-copper mining advocates projects only 427 direct copper mining jobs in all of Minnesota (not 17,000 jobs as some claim).

Until the now-terminated Forest Service study, these and other environmental and socio-economic impacts of sulfide-ore mining in this area had never been studied or thoroughly vetted with the public. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which requires agencies to look before they leap, was passed in 1970, several years after the Twin Metals leases were first issued. By analyzing scientific data, consulting the public, and considering alternative courses of action, NEPA supports informed decision making – here, whether sulfide-ore mining in the Boundary Waters watershed is an appropriate activity.

The Forest Service and the Department of Agriculture are the stewards of America's national forests, and the cancellation of the withdrawal application raises serious questions about your willingness to protect our most cherished public lands and waters from the threats of industrial development and irremediable contamination. We call on you to suspend all authorizations related to mineral development in the Rainy River Drainage Basin and reinstate the application to withdraw 234,328 acres of Superior National Forest lands. The reinstatement would allow the critically important environmental, economic, and social study to proceed to completion. A suspension of mineral and mining approvals should include a halt to any action on the applications to renew the two now reinstated expired Twin Metals mineral leases, and any permitting, leasing, or other approvals by either the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service in the withdrawal study area.

In the event that the Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service choose to ignore science, economics, and the will of the people and decide to move forward with mineral leasing and mine approvals, we strongly urge that:

- All mineral development authorizations are thoroughly analyzed under NEPA through an environmental impact statement (EIS). We are mindful that the Forest Service reviewed 29 prospecting permit applications in a 2012 EIS. Environmental review and analysis of all applications for mineral leases or lease renewals (which are significantly more consequential than prospecting permits), prospecting and exploration permits or extension requests, and other authorizations must answer the threshold question that the terminated withdrawal study process was designed to address: is the watershed of

the Boundary Waters, Voyageurs National Park, the Quetico, and the Superior National Forest an appropriate place for sulfide-ore copper mining?

- The Forest Service be the lead agency for NEPA analysis of all mineral development authorizations. The Forest Service is charged by law with managing and protecting the ecological integrity of the Boundary Waters and the Superior National Forest, and was the lead agency in the 2012 prospecting permit EIS.
- All NEPA reviews must include robust public participation designed to comply with NEPA's public transparency mandate and to rebuild the trust of the American people who participated in good faith in the now-terminated proposed withdrawal study process.
- All NEPA reviews and decisions must be based on solid and comprehensive science, economics, and facts that are made readily available to the public.

In conclusion, we respectfully request that you:

- Reinstate the application to withdraw 234,328 acres of Superior National Forest lands and complete a rigorous, science-based, and transparent study of the environmental, economic, and social risks of sulfide-ore copper mining to four protected areas, and
- Suspend all additional mineral development authorizations on Superior National Forest lands to allow the Forest Service to fully analyze the environmental, economic, and social impacts of sulfide-ore mining in this unique ecosystem and landscape.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,