



As DNR report on PolyMet mine emerges, critics question safeguards

Dan Kraker · Jun 26, 2015

Environment

This field and lake are built on top of old tailings from the LTV Taconite mine at PolyMet near Aurora, Minn. Plans would cover this field with new tailings and waste rock from a new mining operation. *Derek Montgomery | For MPR News 2013*

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State regulators have released a much-anticipated third version of a preliminary environmental report on PolyMet Mining Corp.'s proposed mine near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.

The massive report from the state Department of Natural Resources and its federal partners details how PolyMet plans to mine and process tens of thousands of tons of copper, nickel and precious metals. It also describes the complex engineering measures the company is proposing to prevent pollution from escaping the mine and plant site.

PolyMet officials are praising the report as a major milestone. But critics say the environmental impact statement, which details how the company plans to treat water from the mine's leftover waste and abandoned mine site, doesn't include enough safeguards to protect northeast Minnesota's fragile environment.

"We're either talking about a catastrophic release of toxic waste, or a long-term slow seeping of toxic waste from this site," said Aaron Klemz, communications director for Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness. "Either way, we think it's a bad deal for Minnesota."

Since PolyMet first proposed the controversial mine more than a decade ago, it has generated consternation among environmentalists. Copper-nickel mining creates potentially more severe water pollution risks than the iron mining that has long supported the region.

· April 7: MN's St. Louis River listed among nation's most endangered (<http://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/04/06/st-louis-river-endangered>)

But the plan also has fostered economic hope on the Iron Range. PolyMet promises to create 360 good paying jobs in an area that has been hit hard by about 1,000 mining layoffs this year.

The report has been sent to the federal Environmental Protection Agency and three Ojibwe bands in northeast Minnesota for review. Their feedback will then be incorporated into a final statement that DNR officials plan to release for public comment sometime this fall.

"It's sort of bureaucratic inside baseball," DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr said of the report.

But he acknowledged that releasing the report of more than 3,000 pages is a milestone for the environmental-review process.

"It's taken us 10 years to get here," Landwehr said. "So it is a big deal."

Lingering environmental concerns

Although the latest version of the environmental impact statement is intended for internal review, not public consumption, it is nonetheless a public document available via the state's open records law.

Critics of the proposal have obtained copies of the report and begun to pore through it. They're already raising some of the same objections they voiced two years ago, when the last version of the document was released to the public.

Clean water exits a reverse osmosis machine owned and developed by PolyMet operates in a test facility Friday, September 27, 2013 in Virginia, Minn. *Derek Montgomery | For MPR News 2013*

A lingering issue of concern is the length of time water at the site will need to be treated.

PolyMet aims to build containment systems to capture the majority of water at the mine and plant sites. Using an expensive technology known as "reverse osmosis," the mine would then scrub the water of pollutants before it is released to the environment.

According to the document released this week, those water treatment systems would be needed "indefinitely" to meet state and federal clean water standards. The company would conduct pilot studies with a goal of transitioning to a natural system of wetlands to filter the water.

"That's not acceptable," said Klemz of Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, one of several environmental groups fighting the mine proposal. "If they can't show us how it is they're planning on not allowing pollution to escape from this site, especially if they've admitted it's going to be forever, then Minnesotans deserve answers about how they plan to treat polluted water and keep it on that site."

Environmental groups are planning a news conference for Monday to detail their objections to the proposal. Among them, Klemz said, is that the document dismissed a major Canadian mine accident in 2014, in which a dam holding back a tailings pond at the Mount Polley gold and copper mine burst, releasing over 1 billion gallons of waste into nearby lakes and rivers.

An independent, expert report commissioned after the disaster recommended that new mining projects filter water from mine tailings before disposing them. But the preliminary environmental impact statement for the PolyMet mine concluded that design doesn't offer "significant environmental benefit."

"We're really afraid [that] in PolyMet's case they have ignored the lessons of history and they're poised to repeat the same problems that happened at Mt. Polley," Klemz said.

PolyMet plans to reuse a 40-year-old tailings pond covering 4 square miles to store iron mining waste. Engineers have tested its strength and designed additional methods to strengthen it, said Brad Moore, the company's vice president of environmental and government affairs.

"The bottom line is this: We have a basin there, we're enhancing it and it minimizes our environmental footprint as opposed to building a new one," he said.

Moore, a former commissioner of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, also disputed the need for long-term treatment at the mine site. The company estimates mechanical water treatment will only be needed for about 40 years after the mine is closed.

When the mine opens, Moore said, PolyMet would begin testing passive wetland filtering systems designed specifically for the site's water chemistry. He said state and federal regulators chose the word "indefinitely" in the document to be conservative, since the reverse osmosis technology is "treatment that's already proven."

Joe Baltich of Ely makes public comments in front of a capacity crowd in Duluth during the PolyMet copper mine project public hearing on the project's environmental impact statement in January 2014. *Clint Austin | Duluth News Tribune 2014*

Ten years in the making

The draft report released this week is the third draft environmental review of PolyMet's proposed mine completed in the last decade. The EPA gave the first attempt a failing grade in 2009. PolyMet then incorporated several environmental changes into its plan, which resulted in a higher grade from the EPA when the second draft was released in 2013.

Moore said the latest draft includes responses from the DNR, Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Forest Service to the 58,000 public comments received in late 2013 and early 2014. He said it demonstrates the project can meet all state and federal environmental standards.

· April 24: DNR mines rich lode of comments on PolyMet (<http://www.mprnews.org/story/2014/04/24/daily-circuit-polymet-comments>)

Landwehr, the DNR commissioner, said he wouldn't go that far. Instead, he said the draft shows PolyMet has a plan for meeting those standards. But he said the DNR will not make a decision on whether the engineering controls PolyMet has proposed are adequate to protect the environment until it issues permits for the mine.

The EPA and the three northeastern Minnesota Ojibwe bands have until Aug. 4 to submit their comments on this draft. Landwehr said a final environmental impact statement will then be released. At that point there will be another 30-day period for public comment.

Those comments will then be addressed in a final environmental report, which Landwehr said likely would not be released until early 2016. At that point the Minnesota DNR and federal regulators will decide whether or not the environmental impact statement is "adequate."

Barring any lawsuits, that would clear the way for PolyMet to begin securing the 21 different permits it will need to open the mine. But Landwehr cautioned that even if the environmental report is deemed sufficient, there is no guarantee any permits will be granted. He acknowledged that the review process for PolyMet has been long, but said the agency must conduct a rigorous examination.

"We are being very deliberate in trying to do the most thorough analysis possible, so when we make the decision about whether or not to go, it is in the best interest of the state of Minnesota," Landwehr said.

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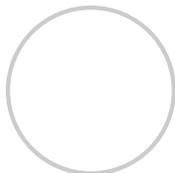
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