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Question:

What should I know about the PolyMet project?

PolyMet proposes the first sulfide (“copper-nickel” or “nonferrous”) mine in Minnesota. Minnesota has been mining iron and taconite for over a hundred years, **but metallic sulfide mining is different.** It poses much greater risks of water pollution than iron mining. When you expose iron ore to air and water, you get rust. When you expose sulfide ore to air and water, it can create acid mine drainage, heavy metal runoff, and sulfate pollution.

Sulfide Mining Has Never Been Done Safely

Mining companies are unable to point to a single example of a sulfide mine that has been operated and closed safely, without polluting nearby lakes, rivers or groundwater. Sulfide mining poses three risks to water: acid mine drainage, sulfates, and toxic metals.

- **Acid Mine Drainage** forms when sulfides, which are embedded with the metals, are exposed to air and water. It creates acidic conditions harmful to plants, fish and animals.
- **Sulfates** are another byproduct that will leach out from the waste rock, mine pit walls and tailings. Sulfates are harmful to wild rice, a culturally and economically significant resource to members of the Lake Superior Chippewa tribes, as well as other aquatic plants.
- **Toxic metals**, including mercury, arsenic, copper, cadmium and others pose risks to wildlife, fish and humans. Sulfate also plays a key role in how animals absorb mercury, resulting in increased mercury content in fish. Mercury in fish is the primary way that humans are exposed, and 1 in 10 infants along Minnesota's North Shore are already born with unsafe levels of mercury in their blood.

PolyMet's Own Water Model Shows that the Pollution May Last 500 Years or More

PolyMet proposes to operate its mine for 20 years, but the risks of pollution will persist much longer than that. Although DNR officials say they don't know how long the pollution will last, PolyMet's own water model demonstrates that the site will still be polluted in 500 years and a DNR spokesman said water pollution “would be a problem for a long time.”



August 2014, Mount Polley copper mine, Canada.

A billion gallons of toxic water were released when a tailings dam broke.

PolyMet Has No Plan for Dealing With Contingencies Like a Tailings Dam Break

PolyMet's proposed mine plan does not account for problems that occur at nearly every mine of this type, such as tailings dam failures, pipeline breakages, or failures of water capture and treatment equipment. This is especially concerning, given the August 2014 catastrophe at the Mount Polley copper mine in Canada that released over a billion gallons of toxic water when a tailings dam broke. At Mount Polley, an independent report faulted the mine company for lacking a "detailed emergency contingency plan," and said it was important to "review such plans in advance of the permitting process." Similarly, no such contingency planning is in PolyMet's mine proposal.

DNR Has Provided Very Little Information About Financial Assurance

Under Minnesota law, a sulfide mining company must provide a damage deposit, money held by the state to pay for cleanup at the site after closure, before it begins operation. This is called "financial assurance." Minnesota's financial assurance rules for nonferrous mines have never been tested, since no sulfide mine currently exists. Sulfide mines in other states have left taxpayers holding the bag for millions of dollars in cleanup costs when financial assurance was inadequate.

Although PolyMet's mine plan has been in development for nearly 10 years, **DNR has not yet disclosed** whether PolyMet will be required to provide financial assurance sufficient to pay for two wastewater treatment plants, and maintenance of barriers, pumps, and liners for decades, if not centuries, after the mine closes. PolyMet has no financial incentive to continue to care for the site after mining is complete, so it is crucial that the state ensure that the funds are available. Yet while the planning for the project is moving along, DNR has yet to share any meaningful information about financial assurance with the public.

Learn more at miningtruth.org

SOURCES:

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