



# Save Lake Superior Association Summer 2020

Dedicated to the restoration and preservation of this Great Lake

[www.savelakesuperior.org](http://www.savelakesuperior.org)

## Summer 2020 Updates

### Hibbing Taconite

Hibbing Taconite operations, which were shut down due to market decline caused by covid19, have re-opened as of July 11. During the shutdown, HibTac proceeded with the expansion and upgrading of its tailings basin. A portion of the tailings dam was repaired in 2012 after an unexpected crack appeared in the dam wall. Due to continued mine expansion placing additional tailings and weight onto the basin, HibTac is in the process of topping its current upstream dam construction with a more stable downstream design. Recent global catastrophic tailings dam failures have resulted in the ban of upstream dams in Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador, as inherently risky technology.

As part of our comments on the HibTac tailings dam expansion proposal, the Save Lake Superior Association, along with Save Our Sky Blue Waters and Wetlands Action Group, requested that the Army Corps of Engineers 404 permit regarding wetland impacts caused by the tailings dam reconstruction be re-noticed, with at least a 45 day comment period, a public hearing, and notices in local papers.

Our organizations believe that it makes no sense to put more mine waste on top of an inherently risky basin. Regulators need to look at safety concerns as the primary issue that needs to be addressed, not as an afterthought in order to allow more mining and increased waste disposal at a risky dam site. We also believe that the public needs to be fully informed about mine issues that carry a potential for harm to the public.



*Brumadinho Dam Collapse Aftermath in Brazil*

Our groups received no response from the Army Corps; the 15-day public comment period was never extended.

Catastrophic dam failures, such as the Brazilian Samarco dam collapse in 2015 and Brumadinho in 2019, resulted in the deaths of workers and people in neighboring villages. The latest tailings dam collapse occurred on July 5, 2020 at a small gold mine in Azuay Province in Ecuador, releasing 50 tons of pollutants into the Tenguel River.

All mining activities have been stopped at the site and the mine permit could be revoked. More such tailings basin failures are predicted as the mining of lower grade metals results in more waste material.

With six active taconite mines in northern Minnesota, and PolyMet 's toxic copper sulfide mine awaiting judicial review of its permits, the waters flowing into Lake Superior, as well as the Rainy River watershed, are at risk.

PolyMet, HibTac, Keewatin Taconite, Minorca. and Minntac all have tailings basins that are of the upstream design. United Taconite has a centerline/upstream design and Northshore uses the centerline model. All basins will require perpetual monitoring and maintenance.

### **Other Business As Usual**

According to the MPCA 2020 Second Quarter Mining Report, the agency continues to evaluate U.S. Steel's request for site specific standards at Minntac, while waiting for the 2019 Court of Appeals decision regarding the matter of re-issuance of the NPDES (National Pollution Discharge Elimination System)/ SDS (State Disposal System) permit for Minntac's tailings basin.

The MPCA continues to review air emissions for KeeTac, Northshore Mining, and currently idled Magnetation plants. Northshore continues to have problems with air fibers, tailings basin progression, and fluoride compliance.

As of July 28, 2020, the Army Corps of Engineers noticed a 30-day public comment period for the progression of Northshore's Milepost 7. To allow for the increase in tailings deposition, the railroad that serves the tailings basin must be relocated. A total of 163.43 acres of jurisdictional wetlands will be impacted, along with 8,570 linear feet of stream resource (Little 39 Creek and Big 39 Creek). Compensatory wetland mitigation is outlined in the notice and can be commented upon. (Refer to MVP-2015-02528-RMM under US Army Corps of Engineers St. Paul District). Wetland regulations continue to be weakened as mining expands, resulting in a net loss of high-quality wetlands throughout northeast Minnesota. Wetlands serve as carbon sinks, water filtration systems, and sources of biodiversity for plant life, wildlife, birds and waterfowl, amphibians and reptiles.

In ongoing legal actions, four cases regarding PolyMet are currently before the Minnesota State Supreme Court: the air permit, the Permit to Mine, and two dam permits.

### **Teck Resources - The Mine No One Mentions**

Teck Resources copper-nickel sulfide deposit is located between the deposit claims of PolyMet (Glencore) and Twin Metals (Antofagasta). These deposits straddle two watersheds--Rainy River and Lake Superior. At 0.43% copper mineralization, Teck's potential project is of higher grade than PolyMet's 0.28% copper, and just below Twin Metals projected 0.5%. Note that all of the mineralization is below 1%, which means we would be mining and destroying large swaths of northeast Minnesota to produce 99% waste rock.

PolyMet has already made known to its investors that it could expand its proposed production from 32,000 tons per day, the basis upon which it received its permits, to 118,000 tons of ore per day, in order to become more profitable. With 2/3 excess capacity at the crushing plant that PolyMet purchased from the bankrupt LTV Steel Mining Company, it becomes obvious that PolyMet could use a partner or two. This extends to the building of a costly hydrometallurgical plant to process copper and nickel, rather than railing/shipping semi-processed ore to Canada. Either Twin Metals or Teck could partner with PolyMet, whose Permit to Mine includes the building of a hydromet.

## The Boundary Waters School Trust Land Exchange Debacle

Many environmental groups have chosen to ignore Teck. Instead of opposing Teck's massive copper mine that would straddle the Lake Superior and Rainy River divides, many are choosing to support a federal land exchange that would literally place land needed by Teck for waste rock, tailings disposal, or other mine facilities, into state hands. The exchange from federal to state ownership would lessen environmental review and strip away Weeks Act protections that prohibit the destruction of the surface land. The words of deceased state representative David Dill are prophetic - "...we should mine, log, and lease the hell out of that land that we get in the [ex] change."

Rather than demanding or waiting for a buy-out of state trust lands currently embedded in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), many have acquiesced to a plan that will continue to further damage the already stressed water, forests, wetlands, and wildlife of Superior National Forest located outside of the BWCAW. The worst-case scenario would be facilitating the opening of a copper-nickel sulfide range in the headwaters of the Lake Superior and Rainy River watersheds.

The lax agency oversight of Minnesota's taconite mines clearly demonstrates that sulfide mines, once permitted, will be able to pollute without repercussions. Mercury emissions and the leaching of sulfates into the watershed play havoc with fish populations and wild rice stands. While toxic metals contaminate the water, small particulate air emissions contaminate the air. Proposed copper-nickel sulfide mining will only add to the pollution, creating more health impacts for fish, birds, wildlife, plants - and humans.

### The COVID19 Gift

Until the public stops buying into corporate propaganda and starts questioning how we use our resources, we are on a path of rapidly declining sustainability. COVID19 has given us the downtime to contemplate and evaluate life style choices. Each dollar that one spends in the marketplace is a vote for a particular product, business, or corporation.

This is the opportune time to explore both practical and creative ways to lessen one's impact upon the environment, and to reconnect with the natural world that provides us with the air, water, food, shelter, and beauty that we need in order to survive and thrive. Solutions to our huge environmental and climate crises will appear once we re-establish our connections to nature, and place value upon restoring our water and our land and cleaning up our air for the benefit of all living here.

*Elanne Palcich, Board Member*

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