

NorthMet Mine

Developer: PolyMet, subsidiary of Glencore

Location: Saint Louis County, Minnesota

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Background

In February of 2005, Polymet submitted an initial proposal to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for an open pit sulfide-ore copper nickel mine named “NorthMet,” which would be the first mine of its kind in the state of Minnesota. PolyMet is a Canadian subsidiary of the multinational commodity trading and mining conglomerate, Glencore.

Located in Saint Louis County, between the towns of Babbitt and Hoyt Lakes, the NorthMet mine would refurbish a portion of the old LTV Steel Mining Company processing plant. During each year of operation, the mine is projected to produce 72 million pounds of copper, 15.4 million pounds of nickel, 720,000 pounds of cobalt, and thousands of pounds of other precious metals ([PolyMet](#)).

The NorthMet mine will be located on 6,650 acres of the Superior National Forest. PolyMet traded 6,690 acres of its own land held in Minnesota to acquire this tract of land. According to PolyMet, the mine will employ 360 workers directly while indirectly creating 600 other jobs. Additionally, the mine is predicted to generate \$515 million every year during its 20 year lifespan.



Location of proposed NorthMet mine¹

Saint Louis County is located in the region of northern Minnesota known as the “Iron Range.” Made up of nine different counties, the median income in the Iron Range in 2014 was just over \$45,000, significantly less than the state median from

the same year which was near \$62,000. Additionally, the Iron Range population trends older than the rest of the nation with 19.3 percent of the population over the age of 65, while national averages hover around 15 percent ([Schuettler](#)). Politically, the Iron Range was also known for being a staunchly Democratic region of the state. This changed in the 2016 Presidential election when the vast majority of the region voted for President Trump ([Brooks, 2017](#)).

The Iron Range has a rich history and mining in the area has largely been iron-ore taconite. Due to the entry of Chinese iron on the global market beginning in the 1970’s, taconite mining in the Iron Range experienced a major decline. This is a large contributing factor in the Iron Range’s below median income levels as well.

Policy Context

Copper and nickel are in the national and international spotlight. This is due their crucial roles in numerous modern day technologies ranging from smartphones to wind turbines and electric vehicles. Legislators in support of the mine argue that the NorthMet mine is necessary for the advancement of clean technologies that could buttress a national clean energy economy.

On the state level, stances are somewhat divided. Some state legislators have expressed full support of the mine, citing new jobs and community development benefits. Meanwhile, Governor Mark Dayton has expressed concerns about the environmental impacts that the mine could have and what taxpayers might have to pay for cleanup. Despite this, the governor has agreed to approve the mine. This decision was made with the caveat that a hard stance would be taken by his administration against a second proposed sulfide-ore copper-nickel mine that is directly adjacent to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and Wilderness ([Coolican, 2017](#)). On the

whole, members of the GOP tend to support the mine while members of the Democratic Farmer-Labor party (DFL) are deeply divided. The division mainly lies between the Iron Range and the Twin Cities metropolitan area, both of which have historically been DFL-dominated regions. DFL legislators from the Twin Cities tend to oppose the mine, while those from greater Minnesota and the Iron Range support it ([Helgeson, 2013](#)).

Public Response and EIS Process

The public's response to the proposed mine is also deeply divided. Citing the Iron Range's long history of mining, many in support of the mine argue that NorthMet would be a welcome revitalization of the area's culture, tradition and history ([MiningMinnesota](#)). On the other hand, many Minnesotans oppose the mine on environmental grounds. Groups such as [Friends of the Boundary Waters](#), multiple Ojibwe bands (namely the [Fond du Lac band](#)), [The New Boundary Waters Business Coalition](#), and [WaterLegacy](#), argue that open-pit sulfide-ore copper nickel mining is too dangerous to allow, especially given that every other sulfide-ore copper-nickel mine in the world has contaminated its surroundings. Minnesotans who oppose the mine are especially concerned about the NorthMet mine because of its location within the Saint Louis River watershed, which flows into Lake Superior. Given the poor track record of these mines, mine opponents argue that keeping Lake Superior unpolluted should take precedent above all else.

NorthMet argues that they are committed to environmental protection. The company's website contends that their mine is "designed to comply with all applicable state and federal standards to protect Minnesota's water, air and other natural resources." They also note that Minnesota has some of the strictest mining standards in the country ([Polymet](#)). These arguments are still not enough for those who oppose the mine, especially considering the fates of other sulfide-ore copper-nickel mines around the world. Additionally, it could be argued that complying with state and federal standards is not

"environmental commitment", rather it is simply a satisfaction of rules so that the mine might be built.

A record 58,000 comments were submitted during the 90 day Public Response Period that occurred as a part of the Forest Service's "Supplemental Draft Environmental Statement" in 2013. This is the largest participation in a public response period in Minnesota's history. Ninety-eight percent of the comments opposed the mine, only two percent supported it. Despite this, Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources validated the environmental review in March of 2016 and the permitting process began the next month.

Currently the permitting process is concluding and legislation has been passed in the House of Representatives to expedite the land trade process between PolyMet and the U.S. Forest Service ([Roa, 2017](#)).



Aerial View of LTV Steel Mining Company site²

Conclusion

The NorthMet mine has been one of the most controversial extractive industry debates in the state of Minnesota. The project has the support of several legislators at the local, state, and national level despite the strong opposition expressed by tens of thousands of Minnesotans.

While many still express grave concerns about pollution and who will take responsibility, there is no denying that the Iron Range is in desperate need of economic revitalization. The issue is still very much divided and outcomes are uncertain. Numerous state and federal permits still need to be acquired such as the Permit to Mine, the Air Quality Permit, and Wetlands Certification Permit. The permitting process will last several years meaning that the mine could open in a drastically different world economy.

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Photo Sources

¹<https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/866028/000106299307003735/exhibit99-1.htm>

²<http://polymetmining.com/northmet-project/overview/>