

August 17, 2017

Connie Cummins, Forest Supervisor  
Superior National Forest  
8901 Grand Avenue Place  
Duluth, MN 55808-1122

Dear Superintendent Cummins:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) scoping for the U.S. Forest Service's proposed federal minerals withdrawal in the Rainy River watershed. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) has wide ranging resource management responsibilities in the study area. In executing these responsibilities, we engage actively with the U.S. Forest Service and other federal, state, local, and tribal government partners. We look forward to providing data and other assistance to the U.S. Forest Service as you conduct this important analysis.

As you finalize your scoping, MNDNR offers the following information for your consideration:

- The proposed federal minerals withdrawal could affect ecological and biological features and natural processes at multiple scales. There is a wealth of state data that can be used in the EIS to help elucidate the intersection between the mineral withdrawal lands and these ecological and biological features and natural processes. Data warranting analysis in the EIS include Minnesota Biological Survey (MBS) Sites and Preliminary Sites, Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS) rare features data, and Minnesota Watershed Health Assessment data.
- Wild rice, found throughout the proposed minerals withdrawal area, is a sensitive and highly variable emergent aquatic plant. This plant is sensitive to changes in water chemistry and water levels. Currently, multiple agencies are conducting research to understand how sensitive and how resilient wild rice is to such changes. We are actively surveying and documenting wild rice, and other aquatic plants, to gain more information to better manage the resource.
- Waterfowl are known to use most aquatic and riparian habitats throughout the project area. The area receives higher use during spring and fall migration, but there are resident waterfowl species that require nesting and brood rearing habitat as well as a variety of forage options throughout the seasons. These species (e.g., wood duck, goldeneye, mallard, ring-necked duck, Canada goose, and trumpeter swan) require a variety of aquatic habitats and riparian characteristics for survival and success. These habitat components are found in varying extents throughout the project area and aid in sustaining the population of resident and migratory waterfowl.
- Waterfowl hunters and wild rice harvesters hunt and gather on the bodies of water found within the project area and associated watersheds.
- The lands proposed for withdrawal are the headwaters of the Rainy River Watershed and supply water to most of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) lakes, which support a unique fisheries resource. Most of our lake trout lakes in Minnesota are located in this area and the majority are sustained by natural reproduction. Lake trout and their prey food are particularly sensitive to declines in water quality. Outside of the BWCAW, there is documented decline resulting from watershed development and rising water temperatures. The success of lake trout in lakes in the BWCAW is due to both geography and geology, but the continued sustainability is dependent on maintenance of water quality.

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- The Rainy River headwaters also supply water to Voyageur's National Park, some of which serve as sources for community drinking water supplies. Waters in both the BWCAW and Voyageurs are state-designated Outstanding Resource Values Waters under the Clean Water Act.
- MNDNR has the fiduciary responsibility to manage Permanent School Trust Fund (PSTF) lands and mineral rights consistent with MN Statute § 127A.31. There is a patchwork of mineral ownership throughout the project area, and thus the proposed federal withdrawal has potential implications for other mineral owners, including the State of Minnesota. For your general information, please note the following:
  - In the proposed minerals withdrawal area there are approximately 147,600 acres of state-owned mineral rights consisting of 95,000 acres of PSTF mineral rights, 51,600 acres of forfeited mineral rights (benefiting counties, school districts and local governments), and 1,000 acres of other state-owned mineral rights (i.e., mineral rights associated with lands acquired by DNR for various program purposes).
  - Within the proposed withdrawal area, there are 62 active nonferrous leases administered by the state, totaling 20,033 acres.
  - The estimated state, federal, and private mineral resources within the proposed withdrawal area are significant: 88 billion pounds of copper, 27 billion nickel, 1.6 billion pounds of cobalt, 22 million ounces of platinum, 54 million ounces of palladium, 11 million ounces of gold, and 338 ounces of silver.
  - The current market value of these mineral resources is estimated to be \$500 billion.

MNDNR has participated in previous federal environmental reviews relating to exploration activities in the Superior National Forests, including the 2012 Final Environmental Impact Statement on Federal Hardrock Mineral Prospecting Permits, Superior National Forest, Cook Lake, St. Louis, Koochiching Counties, MN.

The pending EIS and the decision it will inform concerning the U.S. Forest Service's proposed federal minerals withdrawal in the Rainy River Watershed have important implications for the people of Minnesota, and for the biological, water, and mineral resources that MNDNR manages on their behalf. We are ready to assist with your effort and will supply data, technical expertise, and other assistance as needed.

Sincerely,



Luke Skinner, Director  
Division of Ecological and Water Resources

c: Barb Naramore  
Lori Dowling-Hanson  
Jess Richards