

Enormous mine, enormous consequences

by Eric Hansen

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Take a moment to think about northern Wisconsin's Penokee Hills. Picture the vast swath of forested ridges, the shady glens where pristine water flows from headwaters springs.

This is God's country, a land of thundering waterfalls and sparkling cascades, where clear running streams run to that greatest of inland waters, Lake Superior. There, at the mouth of the Bad River, the Penokee Hills water retains its potent purity, nurturing not only the largest wild rice beds in the Great Lakes region but a critical sturgeon spawning site.

I know this place. After walking 800 miles to assess Wisconsin's most memorable natural areas, I chose to highlight the Penokee Hills in my book "Hiking Wisconsin."

Now, imagine the Penokee's ridgeline, and the sparkling water of its trout streams, turned into an industrial sacrifice zone - on a scale that is almost beyond belief.

To help us grasp the gigantic size of the proposed Penokee open pit mine, let's picture the mine superimposed on familiar Milwaukee-area geography and landmarks.

First, let's assess the proposed iron mine's length. Begin at the Summerfest grounds. Drive west past Miller Park - and the Zoo Interchange, too. Keep going past Moreland Road - and past the Waukesha airport as well. Drive until you are just a mile short of the west end of Pewaukee Lake. That is 22 miles, the length of the proposed Penokee mine project.

The mine would be a half-mile wide.

To grasp the mine's depth, let's return to Summerfest and look up at the U.S. Bank Center, Wisconsin's

tallest at 600 feet. The proposed mine would be almost twice as deep as that building is high, about 1,000 feet.

Given the enormous size of the proposed mine's open pit and the huge amounts of rock piles and ground-up rock that would result, it is reasonable to believe that long-lasting water pollution on a scale that matches the mine's size would result.

This is not a mine our grandparents would recognize, a minor incision. This is the new style mining - a mountaintop removal mine project that would turn a unique part of northern Wisconsin into a West Virginia-like land of sorrow.

If you believe, as I believe, that such a momentous proposal, with its huge implications for our northern waters, merits thorough examination and public discussion, you are hardly alone.

Think back to 1997 - when a 91-7 vote in the state Assembly and a 27-6 vote in the state Senate passed a common-sense, "prove it is safe first" mining code. Gov. Tommy Thompson signed the bill into law. The notable vote totals in the Legislature reflect the deep affection Wisconsinites have for our pristine waters.

That wise law allows citizens access to critical information on mine proposals.

Now, mine proponents want to rush through legislation that would remove key parts of that law.

Insist that your state representatives stand up not only for clean water but the common-sense clean government procedures that protect the public's right to know - procedures put at risk by mine proponents. Future generations will thank you.

Milwaukee author Eric Hansen is an award-winning outdoor writer and conservation essayist.

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