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Comments: Two-year mining study will be completed

Sec. of Agriculture, Forest Service Chief both cite value in the study of proposed mineral withdrawal on Superior National Forest

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REGIONAL— It appears that the U.S. Forest Service intends to proceed with plans for a two-year study of a proposal to withdraw 234,000 acres of federal land in the Superior National Forest from the nation's mineral leasing program.

That planned study has been the subject of intense lobbying by representatives of Chilean mining giant Antofagasta and Eighth District Congressman Rick Nolan, who oppose the withdrawal. They had hoped the Trump administration would cancel the study and renew two federal mineral leases critical to Antofagasta's proposed Twin Metals copper-nickel mine near Ely.

But in a hearing in the Interior- Environment Appropriations Subcommittee on Thursday, Sec. of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, who oversees the U.S. Forest Service, told Fourth District Congresswoman Betty McCollum that he had met with Interior Sec. Ryan Zinke and that they plan to continue with the study. "I'm not smart enough to know what to do without the facts and the sound science, and we are absolutely allowing that to proceed," said Perdue. "No decision will be made prior to the conclusion of that," he said.

Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, in the same hearing, said that withdrawal study "really allows us to pull together the information and the data and look at the overall balance." While Tidwell said mining is essential and can be done in an environmentally safe manner, he noted that the mining may not be appropriate in every instance, particularly where circumstances elevate the risk. "Sulfide ore, that is more challenging, particularly in areas where we have as much water as we do in that part of the state," he said.

McCollum had, moments before, touted the value of the Boundary Waters Cane Area Wilderness and outlined her concerns about the potential impact of sulfide mining on water quality in the wilderness. The proposed Twin Metals mine would be located within the Kawishiwi River watershed, a central watershed within the BWCAW.

Perdue noted that, as veterinarian, he subscribes to the Hippocratic Oath. “First of all ‘do no harm’ and we hear you loud and clear,” he said.

The comments came as a bit of good news for opponents of the Twin Metals proposal, who had feared that the Trump administration would quickly reverse decisions made under President Obama that had left the controversial mining project all but dead.

“I think it’s reassuring,” said Becky Rom, the national chair for the Campaign to Save the Boundary Waters, who lives in Ely. “I thought Secretary Perdue was quite strong in his comments and on the importance of the two year study. It’s clear he wants to make a decision based on the facts and the science. We couldn’t ask for more.”

While Perdue and Tidwell told the committee that the two-year study will continue, their comments did not specifically address the related issue of renewal of two critical federal mineral leases. In December, the Obama administration denied renewal of those leases, without which the Twin Metals project likely cannot proceed. Antofagasta and Rep. Nolan have urged the Trump administration to reverse that decision and issue the permits as soon as possible. The administration has made no decision to date, and with a two-year study now in process it would appear unlikely that the administration would act on the renewal request until that study is completed.

Rep. Nolan’s office did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment. More on this story will appear in the June 2 edition of the Timberjay.