

SULFIDE MINE ON THE YELLOWDOG PLAINS?

by C. Fred Rydholm, Marquette, Michigan

It seems that no matter how much is said, nor who said it, no matter how the facts are stated or documented at these public hearings, nothing can dissuade the DEQ from their headlong course of granting permission to Kennecott to proceed with their mining operation on the Yellowdog Plains, even after listening to overwhelming testimony against such action.

In the three hearings I have attended, no more than three or four people spoke in favor of the mine. Two of them were the same person, a man from Alger County, the other was brought in by the company from Schoolcraft County. I did not hear one person from the local area speak in favor of it. But the result of these hearings was the temporary granting of a permit and a call for more public hearings. Perhaps this is in hopes that someone would come forth in support.

It appears that no matter what is said at these hearings, the message--though loud and clear--is not getting through to the right people. Kennecott, of course, would have us believe that their courtship of our pristine rivers and lakes these last few years will lead to a happy and mutually-fulfilling marriage – but never mind the string of abusive relationships, all well documented, which the company has left over the course of its questionable past.

But let's focus on the real story: the mine on the Yellowdog Plains. What are some of the things that make this area so delicate and special that it should not be subjected to mining? First and probably foremost, it is located on a high flat glacial moraine, (1,340 feet above sea level) and contains a huge aquifer supplying the headwaters of five or six rivers and dozens of springs. All of this water flows down to Lake Superior. It is also the location of the huge Yellowdog wetlands.

Bordering the proposed mine site on its eastern and western sides is the oldest tree farm (held by one owner) in the State of Michigan. It consists of many thousands of hand-planted trees, and some machine planted trees. This planting has gone on in various amounts for the last 58 years. It was chosen as the Tree Farm of the Year in 1989. To the north and to the south of the mine property are two of the most protected and pristine forests east of the Mississippi River, namely the Cyrus McCormick Experimental Forest to the south, under the jurisdiction of the US Forest Service and involving many lakes and many thousands of acres. To the north, many thousands of acres and many pristine lakes belong to the Huron Mountain Club. Both of these areas have been protected for well over a century.

Two rivers involved are both very unique and special. The one most vulnerable is the Salmon Trout River. Its headwaters run exactly over and through the areas of the mine. Within 50 or 100 feet of the river, they propose an air vent to the ore body. The Salmon Trout River is the last remaining breeding stream of a most remarkable and rare fish in the US—known as the coaster brook-trout. They are a species of brook-trout that may grow to 10 and 12 pounds and more. Huron Mountain Club and the US Fish and Wildlife Service have been working for years, at much cost, to save this rare fish and get it established in other Lake Superior streams where it once flourished. At one time this fish was plentiful and could be caught easily along any shore, even along sand beaches of the worlds largest and at one time purest body of fresh water on earth. The other river, known as the Yellowdog, starts in the McCormick property, but is partially fed by the same source as the Salmon Trout, as it runs for miles through the Yellowdog wetlands. It has been declared a part of the Wild and Scenic River system, passing through miles of public lands, and



it has many spectacular waterfalls.

The trees surrounding the proposed mine site are red pine and white pine, but mostly jack pine. These jack pine are special. At one time, when they were first noticed in the 1930's, they were suspected of being a separate sub-species, as they were 110 to 130 feet tall. Jack pine were not known to grow that tall. There were circumferences of 40 to 60 inches or more.

We have not mentioned the rare sedges, mosses, flowers and the Kirkland warbler, a bird in the precarious position of its evolution of either being just established, or on its way to extinction. The Yellowdog Plains may be its salvation. These plains were the home of the sandhill cranes, pine martin, wolf, fisher and moose, when they were thought to be on the verge of extinction in the Upper Peninsula, but they were always there. Cougar have been sighted, and the last Canadian lynx known in Michigan was shot there a few decades ago. Today the region is in ecological balance, all the unseen organisms in the soil, and on up the chain of life for both plants and animals. They now live in harmony and go undisturbed.

We could go on, but there is one more fact that is very important to me. My family would be more severely affected than anyone else. We own the tree farm mentioned earlier. No one has spent more time in this place nor knows the history of it better than this writer. I have bought, sold and traded land on and near these plains for 60 years. I wrote an in-depth history of the whole region that was published 20 years ago, "Superior Heartland, A Backwoods History". I knew most of the characters that were involved in its history personally. We even once owned the land where the proposed mine is to be situated. We built a camp, which is within a mile of it about 60 years ago. Because of this, our family has many concerns, many of which have never been addressed. In fact the company has never attempted to communicate with us, and we are their closest neighbors. Finally, on February 7th, 2007, we got a paper from the MDEQ with no answers to the following questions.

We certainly would like to know if the acid dust will kill our trees. Will we be able to use the road we always have to reach our property? Will we lose the water in our ponds that depend on the water table? Will the glaring lights from the operation hide the stars we are used to watching, and will the noise of the rock crusher and heavy trucks moving day and night, replace the tranquility that was one of the most endearing features of our stay there? Also I remember well how the earth shook and the houses cracked when I lived in Republic, from the drilling and blasting going on in the nearby Republic Mine. Will we be subjected to this also?

We don't even know where the settling ponds will be, nor how big, or where they will leak. We don't know how high the tailing piles will be, or how they hope to protect them from acid runoff. "There is another, more subtle, more long lasting and more difficult effect to mitigate." As quoted in a letter from Bruce Marsh, Professor at John Hopkins University, Dept. of Earth and Planetary Sciences, "This is the effect of disruption of the subsurface water system in an area as delicate as this. The real challenge in mining is the management of subsurface water. In many ways the mine is like a severely leaking ship. The mine goes deep into the ground water table and the water must be vigorously pumped out to keep the mine dry. History has documented over the past 100 years in this area that even logging greatly disrupts the ground water table. Water levels in ponds increase, streams change their drainage patterns, fish habitat is forever affected. But mining of the magnitude, which is not, in and of itself, enormous, will alter the water system in ways that will almost certainly severely damage this land forever. The forest may die; streams may dry up. Regardless of the adherence to environmental laws, this mine will irreversibly damage singularly beautiful and majestic Michigan wild land. Michigan can no longer afford this extravagance." Dr. Marsh has spent considerable time hiking and observing this area of mostly original forest lands.

There has been no explanation as to what roads or routes they will use to transport this dangerous product. No one has told us how they plan to protect the transfer points, loading and unloading. If by rail, will they use the same cars that now haul pellets which spill from them for miles, but this sulfide ore could contaminate streams and forests all along the route for miles. There are other troublesome concerns, too numerous to mention, but we think mistakes have already been made. If I lease a piece of property to someone for twenty years, when the lease is up, I get my property back. But when Kennecott leases the mineral rights for twenty years, when the lease is up the minerals are gone! Those minerals belonged to the people of the State of Michigan. Why weren't there public hearings when those leases were let? And as our land values go down, will our taxes also be reduced?

Why hasn't the DEQ, the company, or some other government agency conferred with the adjoining neighbors and close-by landowners when a project like this is being contemplated? Most government entities usually notify the neighborhood, by sheer courtesy, if not by law. We firmly believe that before any permit is given, every question of every citizen who has already been established in the area should be notified and answered, with every warning and penalty spelled out.

We firmly believe that this potentially dangerous project is not being handled properly by our state agencies. It looks as though the DEQ can't wait for the mine to get started so they can see what happens.

THE WHOLE THING

—William Stafford

These trees and boulders, cliffs,
Vistas without any plan—they are waiting.
These presences don't notice you,
but they have endless patience and courtesy.
And over the years
the calls of meadowlark in the morning
have rinsed off these upland parts of the world.

*I think we should keep some of this,
in case God comes back
to see what we did with it.*