

Rushing mine permits puts water at risk

By Eric Hansen Oct. 31, 2011

Wisconsinites have a deep affection for our pristine waters and a history of applying due diligence and reasonable prudence while questioning ill-conceived industrial projects that threaten that water. Think of the memorable citizens campaigns that blocked Exxon's proposed mine on the Wolf River and Perrier's plan for massive water withdrawals from the Mecan River watershed.

There is a new threat to Wisconsin's waters: proposals to "streamline" our state's common-sense "show me it is safe first" mining code. Currently, these efforts take the form of Special Session Senate/Assembly Bill 24 and its provisions weakening citizen input, water protection and the state mining code.

Why dilute or rush the thorough civic discussion and scientific investigation that has served this state's citizens and wise stewardship of its water so well?

Both the BP Gulf of Mexico disaster and the Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown remind us of the sheer magnitude of damage possible when due diligence lapses. Rosy "Don't worry, it can't happen here. We know what we are doing" industry-generated, public relations campaigns don't necessarily prevent horrendous industrial accidents leading to serious, long-lasting pollution.

Are the BP and Fukushima experiences relevant to Wisconsin and the Upper Great Lakes?

The urgency of that question grows rapidly when you appraise the surge in mining activity and proposals for new mines in the Upper Great Lakes region, a wave of activity apparent for some time in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and now crossing into Wisconsin.

Wisconsinites are becoming familiar with Gogebic Taconite's proposal for a gigantic open pit mine west of Hurley. Less well known are other plans that would affect our water.

One is Kennecott/Rio Tinto's Eagle Project, a metallic sulfide mine near an Upper Peninsula stream draining into Lake Superior.

A second proposed metallic sulfide mine in the U.P. would be almost directly under the Menominee River, a stone's throw from Wisconsin. Aquila Resources, promoters of that mine project, also began preliminary drilling this summer on a site near Wausau.

Have we, as a state and region, done a thorough assessment of these new mine proposals? Do these mine proposals risk our water through the same faulty industrial logic that showed up at BP and Fukushima?

The main proponents of proposals to "streamline" Wisconsin's mining code are Gogebic Taconite and its allies. Their mine project would create a pit 4 miles long, nearly 1,000 feet deep and a quarter-mile wide in the Penokee Hills. The tailings pile would be similarly huge and could drain downstream through the Bad River watershed, threatening both the wild rice beds of the Bad River Chippewa and the drinking water of the city of Ashland and other towns.

As an outdoor writer and hiker, I'm familiar with northern Wisconsin and the U.P. A few years back, I walked 1,700 miles while researching twin hiking guidebooks for those worthy landscapes. I'm also a 20-year veteran of the tool and die trade.

When I connect the dots between the flawed industrial decision-making processes that lead to the BP and Fukushima fiascos and efforts to "streamline" Wisconsin's mining code, I am deeply concerned. The new surge in mining activity has huge implications for our northern waters - both in Wisconsin and the U.P. - and warrants our careful deliberation.

When citizens push, governments move into motion. Insist that your state and federal representatives stand up for due diligence and common-sense conservation throughout the Upper Great Lakes - as well as the current wise Wisconsin mining code.

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