# Big, Beautiful Bill quietly revives Twin Metals mining leases near Boundary Waters



A controversial provision nestled within the massive reconciliation bill known as “Big, Beautiful Bill” may pave the way for a foreign-owned mining company to access thousands of acres of public land bordering Minnesota’s cherished Boundary Waters wilderness. Environmental advocates are sounding alarms, claiming that the legislation could usher in substantial water pollution risks to one of America’s most pristine natural landscapes.

Earlier this month, a wave of relief washed over conservationists when Congressional leaders dropped a set of highly contentious provisions that would have seen the sale of vast swathes of federal land in Nevada and Utah. These plans faced fierce backlash from public land proponents, including some surprising allies among Republican lawmakers, such as Ryan Zinke from Montana, who firmly opposed any sell-off of public land. However, despite this victory, a much less publicised measure remains, potentially allowing Twin Metals Minnesota, a subsidiary of Chilean mining giant Antofagasta PLC, to lease land in perpetuity adjacent to the Boundary Waters wilderness.

Becky Rom, the national chair of Save the Boundary Waters, described this provision as a “giveaway of critical and sensitive federal public land forever to a single mining company.” She emphasised the permanence of this arrangement: “It is a giveaway… This is forever.”

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) was first protected by Congress in 1964 and spans 1.1 million acres of unspoiled lakes and forests, hosting an array of wildlife and attracting approximately 150,000 visitors annually. This area significantly contributes to Minnesota’s $13.5 billion outdoor recreation economy, with the US Forest Service attesting to its “irreplaceable” natural quality that maintains “extremely high water quality.”

However, the region is under threat from its mineral wealth. Antofagasta has long sought to exploit copper and nickel deposits near the BWCAW, and efforts to establish a mine took a hopeful turn during the Trump administration. After suspending mining leases initiated under Barack Obama, the Biden administration responded by rescinding these leases and imposing a 20-year moratorium on mining in the Superior National Forest, which encompasses the potential mining area. The Biden administration cited environmental risks as a primary justification, particularly concerning the impacts of acid mine drainage—a well-documented incident in sulfide ore mining.

In a troubling turn of events, recent lobbying efforts by Antofagasta and its North American branch appear to have yielded significant results. The reconciliation bill, recently passed in the House, now includes language that effectively reinstates these mining rights and lifts the previous moratorium, allowing Twin Metals to pursue a copper-nickel project spanning nearly 6,000 acres near the wilderness. Furthermore, the provision grants the company rights to lease renewals indefinitely and curtails the ability of citizens to legally challenge these arrangements, as only Twin Metals retains the right to judicial review.

Critics of this provision, including Minnesota Senator Tina Smith, have raised their voices in protest. “Senator Smith strongly opposes the reckless Republican provision,” a spokesperson stated, pointing out the potential ecological ramifications of allowing such mining operations so close to the Boundary Waters, which has historically shown to be vulnerable to damage from similar undertakings.

While Twin Metals has dismissed concerns regarding pollution impacts as unfounded, stating that acid mine drainage is a “nonissue,” a significant body of scientific evidence belies this assertion. Potential ramifications of copper mining in the region include detrimental impacts on the water quality of both Birch Lake and the Kawishiwi River, both of which feed directly into the BWCAW. Conservationists stress that failure to effectively manage the toxic byproducts of mining could yield devastating consequences, covering extensive regions in contamination.

As the reconciliation bill progresses through the Senate, there is growing hope among conservationists that this detrimental provision can be stripped from the final legislation. They argue that including such measures in a budget bill may violate Senate rules regarding “extraneous provisions.” With the future of Minnesota's treasured wilderness hanging in the balance, the outcome could significantly affect both local ecology and the state’s vibrant outdoor tourism economy.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/06/minnesota-boundary-waters-pollution), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/ea4ebc6998a2e22b11d30e1cc5d2cdd4)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/06/minnesota-boundary-waters-pollution), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/5005340ca31c10e0fe5eed4076ae8421), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/96f09c08-1438-4f52-9b52-2178e071bfac)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.bwcapac.org/the-issue), [[6]](https://waterlegacy.org/potential-sulfide-mining/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://apnews.com/article/38316cb7396630b5ee48c05cea7e75a0)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/06/minnesota-boundary-waters-pollution> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/5005340ca31c10e0fe5eed4076ae8421> - A federal judge dismissed Twin Metals' lawsuit seeking to regain mineral rights for a proposed $1.7 billion copper-nickel mine near Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The ruling is a setback for the project, which faces opposition from environmental and tourism groups concerned about potential ecological risks. The Biden administration had previously canceled the leases and imposed a 20-year mining moratorium in the area. Twin Metals, a subsidiary of Chilean company Antofagasta, expressed disappointment and is considering next steps, including potential appeals. Environmental advocates hailed the decision as a significant victory for wilderness protection.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/96f09c08-1438-4f52-9b52-2178e071bfac> - The article discusses global mining companies, including Antofagasta, benefiting from the Trump administration's pro-mining policies. It highlights the Resolution copper project in Arizona, which could be among the first approved under Trump's administration. The piece also mentions potential executive orders on critical minerals, aiming to streamline permits and support metal refining facilities. Despite these efforts, challenges like strict regulations and long permitting times persist. The Resolution project faces hurdles, including a Supreme Court decision concerning an Apache sacred site. The administration seeks to secure domestic production of essential minerals for national security.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/ea4ebc6998a2e22b11d30e1cc5d2cdd4> - PolyMet Mining and Teck Resources have formed a joint venture named NewRange Copper Nickel to develop a copper-nickel mine in northeastern Minnesota. This partnership combines PolyMet's NorthMet deposit with Teck's Mesaba deposit, aiming to responsibly develop American-sourced critical minerals for clean energy technologies. However, the NorthMet project remains delayed due to legal and regulatory challenges concerning its permits. Environmental groups have raised concerns about potential ecological risks associated with the sulfide minerals present in the Duluth Complex. Plans for the Mesaba deposit are still in exploratory stages and will require full environmental review and permitting.
5. <https://www.bwcapac.org/the-issue> - Twin Metals, owned by Chilean mining conglomerate Antofagasta, is attempting to establish a copper-sulfide mine on the edge of Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). The proposed mine would tunnel under Birch Lake and the Kawishiwi River, which drain directly into the BWCAW. The processing facility and tailings basin would be situated at the edge of the BWCAW. Environmental concerns include the inevitability of pollution from such mining operations, as no copper mine has ever been free from polluting surrounding groundwater. The BWCAW is a pristine wilderness area, and the proposed mine poses significant risks to its ecosystem.
6. <https://waterlegacy.org/potential-sulfide-mining/> - Twin Metals Minnesota, a subsidiary of Chilean mining giant Antofagasta, submitted a mine plan for a copper-nickel mine on Superior National Forest lands near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). The proposed mine would be located on the Kawishiwi River and Birch Lake, within three miles of the BWCAW. All water from the proposed mine site would flow into the BWCAW. The mine plan proposes facilities on 1,156 acres of wetlands and forests, with tailings stored on-site on 653 acres. Mining operations would be underground, with blasting adjacent to Birch Lake. The project faces opposition due to potential environmental risks, including acid mine drainage.
7. <https://apnews.com/article/38316cb7396630b5ee48c05cea7e75a0> - The Biden administration has decided to protect Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness from potential mining by closing over 350 square miles of the Superior National Forest from mineral and geothermal leasing for 20 years. This move challenges the planned copper-nickel mining project proposed by Twin Metals Minnesota, whose federal mineral rights leases were canceled by the Biden administration last year after being reinstated by the Trump administration. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland emphasized the protection of the wilderness for its ecological, recreational, and cultural significance. While environmentalists and critics celebrate this as a victory, proponents argue it conflicts with the administration's goals of increasing domestic metal supplies essential for clean energy. Twin Metals plans to fight the decision, citing the mine’s economic benefits and commitment to responsible mining practices. The wilderness area, which draws significant tourism and supports local tribes, remains at risk of future political changes.