

# #3

## Boundary Waters

**THREAT: Sulfide-ore copper mining**

### STATE:

Minnesota

### AT RISK:

Clean water, recreation economy, wildlife habitat

### SUMMARY

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness encompasses 1,200 miles of rivers and streams and more than 1,000 lakes. As the most visited wilderness area in America, it is a major driver of the local economy. However, the Boundary Waters and its clean water are threatened by proposed sulfide-ore copper mining on public lands in the headwaters just outside of the wilderness area's boundary. Mining and associated acid mine drainage, loss of habitat, forest fragmentation, invasive species, and air, noise and light pollution would devastate this fragile ecosystem and the wilderness area's unique values. The Biden administration must act to protect the Boundary Waters from mining by issuing a federal mineral leasing ban, and Congress must pass legislation to forever protect this treasured place.



PHOTO: SAVE THE BOUNDARY WATERS

## THE RIVER

Much of Minnesota's northeastern "Arrowhead" region, including the Boundary Waters, is within the 1854 Ceded Territory, where Anishinaabe people (including the Ojibwe or Chippewa) retain hunting, fishing and gathering rights. Basswood Lake, located in the Boundary Waters and Quetico Provincial Park along the border with Canada, is an ancestral homeland of the Lac La Croix First Nation Community and a sacred place for Anishinaabeg. The Kawishiwi (which in the Ojibwe language means, "river of many beavers' houses") River is an important canoe route through the heart of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and the Superior National Forest. Its waters flow out of the Wilderness through Birch Lake, re-enter the Boundary Waters through Fall and Basswood Lakes, and then flow into Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park and Minnesota's Voyageurs National Park.

The Boundary Waters draws more than 155,000 overnight wilderness visitors annually, and helps power the recreation economy that supports 17,000 jobs in the region and generates more than \$913 million in sales annually. This area provides world-class recreational experiences for all residents and visitors. People, fish and wildlife — including walleye, northern pike, lake trout, smallmouth bass, wolves, lynx, moose, bear, loons, river otters, bald eagles and osprey — all benefit from the clean water that the Boundary Waters provides for drinking, recreating and refuge.

## THE THREAT

The Boundary Waters and the Kawishiwi River are threatened by a massive sulfide-ore copper mine proposed on the banks of the South Kawishiwi River and Birch Lake, through which the river flows. There is strong scientific evidence showing that sulfide-ore copper mining in the watershed would harm the river and the Wilderness. Hydrologists say that pollution from mining in this area is inevitable. Hardrock mining is the most toxic industry in America, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Sulfide-ore copper mine contamination harms water, aquatic and terrestrial species, forests and soils, and poses a serious risk to human health.



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### TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/  
BoundaryWaters2021](https://AmericanRivers.org/BoundaryWaters2021)

PHOTO: NATE PTACEK

Climate change, which is expected to bring more droughts, alternating with more extreme rains, would further exacerbate the negative impacts of a mining operation. Drought-induced low water flows would concentrate pollutants. Subsequent heavy rains could cause floods and the overflow of pollutants into groundwater and streams. Stress on aquatic ecosystems caused by climate change will add to the degradation caused by the impacts of mining. Conversely, an ecologically healthy Boundary Waters is part of the solution for the climate crisis. Its boreal forests provide for carbon sequestration and play a key role in adaptation and resilience of species.

Studies show that sulfide-ore copper mining along lakes and streams that flow into the Boundary Waters would put at risk not only premier fishing, hunting and other recreation on Superior National Forest lands, but also the sustainable economy of northeastern Minnesota. An independent peer-reviewed economic study by Harvard Professor James Stock demonstrated that a ban on copper mining in the Boundary Waters watershed would result in more jobs and more income for the region.

A broad coalition of local and national conservation organizations, businesses, hunting and fishing groups, youth and other allies are working together to achieve permanent protection for this ecologically important, cherished landscape from the threat posed by sulfide-ore copper mining. Bands of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and one Canadian First Nation have also asked the U.S. government to ban sulfide-ore copper mining on federal public lands in the area, which is part of 1854 Ceded Territory.

### WHAT MUST BE DONE

The Biden administration should reverse the indefensible decisions made during the Trump administration that weakened protection for the Boundary Waters and fast-tracked copper mining. The U.S. Department of Interior should initiate a 20-year federal ban on mining on federal public lands in the watershed, starting with a two-year pause and robust study on the risks of mining in this unique and treasured place.

Further, Congress must pass and President Biden must sign Representative Betty McCollum's bill to permanently ban hardrock copper mining on Superior National Forest lands in the Boundary Waters watershed. This bill was passed by the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee last September and is expected to be reintroduced in the 117th Congress.