Dear Acting Secretary Bernhardt, Acting Director Steed, Eastern States Director Mouritsen, Northeastern States Director Gettinger, and Project Manager Strohl,

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters, we write to express our serious concerns with the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) stated intent to renew two expired hardrock mineral leases located in the headwaters of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (Boundary Waters) and Voyageurs National Park on Superior National Forest lands in northeastern Minnesota. BLM lacks authority to renew the leases, which were initially issued in 1966 and expired in 2016 after the U.S. Forest Service determined that their renewal carried an “unacceptable” level of “inherent risk” of devastating impacts on the Boundary Waters and withheld its consent. Nevertheless, after reviving the expired and properly-canceled leases in May, 2018, BLM released an environmental assessment (EA) for the Twin Metals Minnesota Lease Renewals on December 20, 2018 for an inadequate 30-day public comment period spanning the winter holidays and a partial government shutdown. The EA is fundamentally flawed, as it fails to address the significant impacts of sulfide-ore copper mine development on the leases or to consider a no-lease-renewal alternative.

The Boundary Waters is America’s most-visited wilderness and provides nearly endless opportunities for hunting, fishing, and quiet recreation across its 1.1 million acres of interconnected lands and waters. The Superior National Forest itself, which includes the Boundary Waters, contains twenty-percent of all the freshwater within the National Forest System. It also supports an abundance of wildlife from deer, moose, black bear, bald eagle, and...
numerous fish species, to iconic species protected under the Endangered Species Act such as Canada lynx and gray wolf. Adjoining this area are Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota and the Quetico Provincial Park in Canada. Together, these areas provide a vast, trans-national canoe country wilderness that is the driver of a diverse, stable, and growing economy.

Unfortunately, BLM’s EA fails to consider how the development of a sulfide-ore copper mine on the leases would impact these public lands and waters. An overwhelming body of peer-reviewed science\(^1\) shows that such mining would lead to irremediable contamination of the canoe country wilderness’ pristine and interconnected waters, which have little natural ability to buffer against acid mine drainage. The EA also ignores the devastating effects that mining would have on northeastern Minnesota’s sustainable economy – including local businesses that depend on a pristine Boundary Waters and its unsurpassed recreational opportunities and wildlife. Indeed, an independent 2018 study by prominent Harvard economist James Stock found that protecting public lands near the Boundary Waters would generate substantially more jobs and income than copper mining.

Instead, the EA relies on a flawed legal opinion, currently being challenged in court, that the BLM must renew the leases under either the existing terms and conditions from the last renewal or slightly different terms and stipulations that do nothing to prevent water contamination or other foreseeable impacts of developing an industrial mining complex in the heart of the Superior National Forest. Moreover, the EA is only considering alternatives to renew the leases, and fails to discuss or analyze in any way most of the numerous significant and reasonably foreseeable impacts of lease renewal and mine development. In short, the EA is fatally flawed and violates the National Environmental Policy Act.

The fact is that the leases expired in December 2016 when the BLM rejected Twin Metals’ applications to renew them. This was a direct result of the Forest Service’s withholding its consent to renewal of the leases in consideration of the overwhelming science that development of a sulfide-ore copper mine on these leases would result in significant and irreparable contamination of the Boundary Waters and other forest resources and prevent the Forest Service from satisfying its legal obligations to manage and protect those resources. Given these obligations and the known risks of sulfide-ore mining in water rich environments, the Forest Service, in January 2017, proposed to ban mineral leasing on approximately 234,000 acres of Superior National Forest land in the Boundary Waters watershed for twenty years. The Forest Service initiated an environmental study process to analyze the impacts of the proposed ban versus allowing mineral leasing and development to proceed. This would have been the first and only watershed-wide assessment of how sulfide-ore copper mining could affect public lands and waters on the Superior National Forest and nearby protected areas.

Unfortunately, just months before completion and after receiving some 180,000 public comments – 98% of which supported the proposed ban – the Secretary of Agriculture abruptly cancelled the Forest Service’s proposed ban and terminated the study. The announcement followed statements by President Trump and Vice President Pence at rallies in Duluth that they

\(^1\) https://earthworks.org/boundarywaters/
were “rolling back the ban.” Aside from a press release, no information or analysis on the
decision to cancel the proposed ban has been released to the public, despite requests by Congress
and by citizens under the Freedom of Information Act.

With the Forest Service’s proposed ban – and all the science and public support for it – brushed
aside and buried, the Interior Department has forged ahead with its agenda to sell off
Minnesota’s most prized public lands to a foreign-owned mining conglomerate by reinstating
and now renewing Twin Metals’ expired mineral leases. It has done so based on a legally invalid
opinion by a former industry lobbyist now serving as the Department’s head lawyer. That
opinion is the subject of a federal court case, and any action by BLM to renew the leases prior to
resolution of their legal status misleads the public and is a waste of taxpayer dollars. If Twin
Metals wishes to develop a mine on the lands it previously leased, it must follow the detailed
procedures and public process for obtaining a new lease.

Moreover, any decisions about mineral leasing and development on the Superior National Forest
are properly handled with the Forest Service as the lead agency for purposes of the NEPA
review, as has been past practice, including on the cancelled proposed mineral withdrawal and on
a 2012 study to consider prospecting permits in this same area. As the lead agency on the lease
renewal EA, BLM has usurped the Forest Service’s authority on Superior National Forest lands
in what appears to be an attempt to ignore or suppress the best available science that informed
the Forest Service’s decision to withhold its consent to lease renewal in the first place.

In conclusion, sulfide-ore copper mining would have devastating impacts on the unique and
irreplaceable resources of the Boundary Waters and surrounding canoe country. By renewing the
expired leases, BLM would set the stage for a mine that Forest Service experts, the scientific
community, and an overwhelming majority of the public have already rejected. The BLM is
attempting to do so based on a fatally-flawed EA that does not even consider the impacts of
building and operating a mine. At the very least, a full environmental impact statement (EIS) and
robust public process are required. BLM should abandon the current EA and work with the
Forest Service to reinitiate the study of the proposed 20-year mining ban.

Sincerely,

Brett Mayer
Policy Chief
American Canoe Association

Jim Bradley
Vice President, Policy and Government Relations
American Rivers

Marc Fink
Public Lands Legal Director,
Senior Attorney
Center for Biological Diversity

David Jenkins
President
Conservatives for Responsible Stewardship

Tom Koshiol
Founder/Director
Crow River Trail Guards

Sandra Purohit
Legislative Counsel
Defenders of Wildlife
Blaine Miller-McFeeley  
Senior Legislative Representative  
Earthjustice

Aaron Mintzes  
Senior Policy Counsel  
Earthworks

Steve Blackledge  
Conservation Program Director  
Environment America

Tim Schaefer  
Director  
Environment Minnesota

Ann Mesnikoff  
Federal Legislative Director  
Environmental Law & Policy Center

Thomas Wheeler  
Executive Director  
Environmental Protection Information Center

Nicole Ghio  
Senior Fossil Fuels Program Manager  
Friends of the Earth US

Kemia M. Sarraf, M.D., M.P.H.  
President  
genHkids, Inc.

Alyssa Brault  
President  
Gophers for the Boundary Waters

Shelley Silbert  
Executive Director  
Great Old Broads for Wilderness

Scott Kovarovics  
Executive Director  
Izaak Walton League of America

Don Arnosti  
Executive Director  
Izaak Walton League of America - Minnesota Division

Jim Scheff  
Director  
Kentucky Heartwood

Joseph Goldstein  
Founder & President  
Kids For The Boundary Waters

Kimberly Baker  
Executive Director  
Klamath Forest Alliance

Arian Rubio  
Legislative Associate  
League of Conservation Voters

Steve Morse  
Executive Director  
Minnesota Environmental Partnership

Ani Kame'enui  
Legislative Director  
National Parks Conservation Association

Alex Falconer  
Executive Director  
Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness

Amy Goldberg  
Project Manager  
Pando Populus

Ann Manning  
Associate Director  
Science & Environmental Health Network

Athan Manuel  
Director, Public Lands Program  
Sierra Club
Jen Ujifusa  
Legislative Director  
Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

John Sterling  
Executive Director  
The Conservation Alliance

Chris Rackens  
Senior Representative  
The Wilderness Society

Alyssa Brault  
President  
University of Minnesota Outdoors Club

Christina Hausman  
Executive Director  
Voyageurs National Park Association

Larissa Liebmann  
Staff Attorney  
Waterkeeper Alliance

Susan Jane Brown  
Public Lands Director  
Western Environmental Law Center

Kevin Proescholdt  
Conservation Director  
Wilderness Watch

Ann Manning  
Director  
Women’s Congress for Future Generations