

Minnesota can become a world leader in responsible mining

By David Foster and Mark Ritchie

In late July, Tesla's Elon Musk [made a global plea for responsibly mined nickel](#), citing the growing need for nickel to keep up with the worldwide rise in demand for electric cars, trucks, and other vehicles. One of our northern neighbors, Canada Nickel, [responded immediately](#), saying it was prepared to meet Musk's challenge.

As a company totally dependent on the mining of a number of precious metals, including nickel, cobalt and lithium, Tesla knows that nearly all of these metals are being produced in violation of international environmental and labor standards, including the horrific exploitation of young children. Musk's call for "responsible mining" reflects his understanding of the need to find a new approach, and we laud him for this willingness to turn his company's supply chain in a more ethical and legal direction. Perhaps part of this is motivated by the fact that Tesla and other American tech giants are [being sued for human rights violations](#) on behalf of surviving families of cobalt miners.energy future.

Motor vehicle electrification can't happen without mining. The World Bank's 2020 assessment of critical minerals essential to electric cars production, Minerals for Climate Action, [predicts \[PDF\]](#) a 500% annual increase in lithium use over 2018 levels, a 450% increase for cobalt and a 100% increase for nickel to meet current climate targets. Copper production [will need to increase by 1.5 million tons per year](#). Even with 100% recycling of existing materials, [demand for newly mined minerals and precious metals will soar](#).

Minnesota, [one of the top five mining states in our nation](#), has the opportunity to step up to the challenge made by Musk and assume a global leadership role. We have done this in agriculture,

health care, drinking water protection and other economic sectors and we have been financially successful as a region for choosing the ethical and responsible path. As a state we have been on the leading edge in efforts to address the climate crisis, and we know that our key solutions – solar energy, electrification of transportation, wind and other clean energy options – rely on minerals and precious metals. Earth needs a responsible mining leader. Minnesota should provide that leadership.

Minnesota's responsible mining leadership should be built on the same principles that have made us successful in other fields, including transparency, adherence to global labor and environmental standards, and consistently fair enforcement. We should work with mining companies around the world to expand the availability of responsibly mined raw materials and adopt policies that ensure that cars built in the United States for U.S. buyers are no longer contributing to the exploitation of children or ecological destruction. Mining is a global industry, so our standards need to be linked to policies that consumers can rely on.

A car produced in the U.S. for U.S. consumers should be built with responsibly mined products and this should not be undermined by supply chain manipulation or the importing of child-labor produced products. This is not that complicated, as so many other Minnesota manufacturers have already shown. Manufacturers who use these critical minerals, like Tesla, can be required to disclose their sources by mine site with a clear chain of custody, with third-party verification.

The Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance, (IRMA), is already actively certifying mining company compliance with these principles. It has strong support from North America's principal mining union, the United Steelworkers, as well as

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the world's largest steel producer and iron ore mining company, ArcelorMittal. Both the Steelworkers Union and ArcelorMittal are major stakeholders in Minnesota's mining sector and in our Iron Range communities. ArcelorMittal, for example, operates both the Hibbing Taconite and Minorca mines in northern Minnesota. [Other company participants](#) in IRMA include BMW Group, Tiffany's and global mining giant, Anglo-American.

To respond to the growing need for responsible mining to achieve our clean energy future, our state should establish a Minnesota Global Center for Responsible Mining. This Center could function as a publicly supported nonprofit – perhaps affiliated with one or more colleges or universities – to provide a holistic approach to meet the technological, social, and economic challenges to mine responsibly.

Our state has a long tradition of stepping up to meet our own challenges in ways that better the world. Gov. Rudy Perpich, for instance, established the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) after Minnesota opened its doors to refugees from many war-ravaged countries. Today, CVT has become an [important and expert voice in both our state and the global community](#) in post-conflict training and resolution.

Some of the earliest torture survivors who came to CVT were from Ethiopia; they founded a

community that now exceeds 50,000 and is an economic driver of many parts of our economy. Ethiopia recently adopted a new Responsible Mining Law and its government is looking for mining partners from Minnesota and other places to help implement new environmentally and socially responsible standards. We are a logical partner, and this is an opportunity that we should pursue.

We can be the place the world looks to when it comes to responsible mining, much as we are the world's reference point for health care and medical technology. We can become the global champion for creating technological solutions, teaching social contract processes, and developing monitoring protocols, labor and safety standards, and enforcement mechanisms. When complex problems confront Minnesotans, we don't look the other way or hope for the best. Together, we find solutions.

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