

MINNPOST

Responsible mining: Minnesota's next big contribution

Talon Metals has raised the bar for how we all meet the challenge to ensure responsible mining in the 21st Century.

By David Foster and Mark Ritchie

Two years ago, at the start of the Biden Administration, we wrote a commentary about the importance of mining to solving the climate crisis. “Motor vehicle electrification,” we said, “can’t happen without mining. The World Bank’s 2020 assessment of critical minerals essential to electric cars production, [Minerals for Climate Action, predicts 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.”

We also urged federal and state agencies, mining companies, unions, communities, and environmental advocates to recognize that the era of responsible mining was upon us. Without a significant increase in mineral extraction fully integrated within a robustly developed circular economy, there’s no chance of meeting the essential target of limiting the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Two years later we are seeing some of the first promising steps to build the kind of responsible mining industry that others could replicate. In addition, the Biden Administration has started to address some of the critical issues we identified.

First and foremost, we called for a multi-stakeholder effort to develop the standards and practices for how responsible mining

should be implemented. One of those efforts is now taking place in Tamarack, Minnesota, in the nickel mine being developed by Talon Metals. As the company prepares to file its initial Environmental Assessment Worksheet, it will be important that stakeholders recognize that Talon has the potential to become the national model around which responsible mining is defined, globally, for the 21st Century. All stakeholders should be prepared to step up and contribute to this historic opportunity. Talon’s initial approach to mine development is encouraging.

In recognition of the mining industry’s historic struggles with both working conditions and safety, Talon entered into a binding neutrality and card-check recognition agreement with the United Steelworkers, our nation’s largest hard rock mining union. The agreement also includes an enforceable dispute resolution mechanism. In addition, Talon has signed a Project Labor Agreement with the Minnesota building trades unions, guaranteeing that the construction phase of mine development will also create good union jobs.

Talon also initiated regular community meetings to get input on mine impacts both from immediate neighbors and from the Mille Lacs Band of Objibwe whose water rights might be impacted. Based on those meetings and concerns that acid runoff from ore processing might affect water purity, Talon announced, more than a year ago, it

would relocate the ore processing operation to North Dakota on a previous industrial site without the exposure to water drainage at the mine site in Minnesota. It also shrank the site of the mine impact and reduced wetlands takings to under 40 acres. Talon has also been true to its word to continue meeting regularly with the community to address concerns both in Minnesota and in North Dakota.

The next phase of the mine planning and permitting will require diligent participation by all the mine's stakeholders. Based on Talon's current record, we recommend a broader goal – to create in Minnesota a global example for responsible mining. Thus, stakeholders should do more than simply provide expert testimony and comments in the regulatory process. We should also create a public forum where experts on geology, water purification technologies such as reverse osmosis, Native American treaty rights, tailings disposal best practices such as drystacking, labor and safety standards and national security implications can present their ideas to the full range of stakeholders and the general public in our state.

To ensure that such a public forum is successful, we would recommend the formation of an Advisory Board of stakeholders, selected by the governor. In addition, the advisory board should hire a neutral third party with appropriate expertise to manage these activities.

Recently, Talon Metals was awarded a \$114 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy with funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), one of 20 awards to help develop the battery supply chain in the United States. Many of the other pending clean energy investments authorized by the IIJA and the Inflation Reduction Act require the development of Community Benefits Plans to ensure that impacted communities and employees are fully engaged in the energy transition now underway in our country. One of the most

important contributions that Minnesota could make to this overall effort would be to demonstrate in the Talon Metals project how Community Benefits Plans can be implemented to their full effect.

With its commitment to the United Steelworkers and Building Trades and its willingness to meet, early and often, with community stakeholders, listen, and then revise its plans, Talon Metals has raised the bar for how we all meet the challenge to ensure responsible mining in the 21st Century. Let's not miss this opportunity.

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