

USDA Removes Roadblock to Mineral Exploration in Rainy River Watershed

Press Release

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WASHINGTON, D.C., September 6, 2018 – U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue today announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has removed a major obstacle to mineral leasing in Minnesota, through the cancellation of an application which has blocked mineral exploration in the Rainy River Watershed. Interested companies now may soon be able to lease minerals in the watershed in the Superior National Forest. Over the last 15 months the Forest Service conducted a thorough review on this issue and listened to thousands of citizens. Based on this review the USDA Forest Service cancelled the application for the Rainy River Watershed Withdrawal.

“It’s our duty as responsible stewards of our environment to maintain and protect our natural resources. At the same time, we must put our national forests to work for the taxpayers to support local economies and create jobs,” Perdue said. “We can do these two things at once: protect the integrity of the watershed and contribute to economic growth and stronger communities.”

In 2016, the Forest Service segregated approximately 234,000 acres from the federal mineral estate and conducted an extensive review of environmental information related to the proposed mineral activities. The review included a mineral resources report, a biological and economic impact assessment, and potential impacts to water resources, wilderness areas, and cultural resources. The agency solicited public feedback at numerous public engagements. The analysis did not reveal new scientific information.

The Rainy River watershed landscape, which includes the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, is known for its mineral development potential. The Superior National Forest has been mined for decades and is known as the “Iron Range” due to its numerous iron mines. Minerals produced from lands managed by the Forest Service are important to a variety of applications and other forms of technology, from medical and infrastructure applications to household appliances, smart phones, computers, and cars. Additionally, Boundary Waters is well known for high-quality fishing, wildlife viewing and recreational opportunities. This cancellation balances USDA’s commitment to both economic opportunity and conservation.

Interested companies may seek to lease minerals in the watershed. The land management plan for the Superior National Forest includes environmental standards, including water quality standards, that guide the mineral leasing process. Further, the Secretary of the Interior must have the consent of the Forest Service before issuing such leases and retains discretion to deny the lease applications even assuming that the Forest Service does consent. In cases where leases are issued the Forest Service will have the right to include lease stipulations to protect the integrity of National Forest System lands. Additionally, the Forest Service at least will have an opportunity to review the lessee's mining plan of operations for mineral development, and to recommend specific operating requirements. While with respect to some National Forest System lands the Forest Service must consent to any mining plan of operations for mineral development that the lessee submits and may develop specific operating requirements that the lessee must meet during the mineral development.

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