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February 2, 2016

Hon. Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Hon. Sally Jewell
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Hon. Christina Goldfuss
Director
Council on Environmental Quality
722 Jackson Place, N.W.
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Secretary Jewell, and Director Goldfuss:

As the Obama Administration enters its final year, I am writing to urge the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior and the White House to immediately take action to protect two of America's natural treasures – the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA) and Voyageurs National Park. These pristine, water-based federal lands lie within the Rainy River Drainage Basin, where waters flow north from the Laurentian Divide. Proposed sulfide-ore copper mining on federal land in the Basin poses a direct, irreparable, and unacceptable threat to over one million acres of protected federal land and waters, as well as a million acres of protected Canadian park land. Now is the time for the Obama Administration to use its authorities to protect the BWCA and Voyageurs.

Sulfide-ore copper mining has a consistent record of devastating environmental harm, including polluted waters, degraded forests, and unpredictable, catastrophic spills of toxic materials. While Minnesota has a legacy of iron ore mining, we have never had sulfide-ore mining within our state. As the surface managers of the Superior National Forest, the U.S. Forest Service and USDA have the responsibility to ensure that the BWCA is not endangered as a result of sulfide-ore copper mining. Similarly, DOI has an obligation and the authority to ensure that Voyageurs is not threatened by mining pollution.

I am very appreciative that the Obama Administration is exploring options to ensure that the BWCA, Voyageurs and the Superior National Forest are protected for future generations. The time for action is now. I urge USDA, DOI, and the White House to immediately commence the process of protecting these endangered federal areas by taking three important steps:

1. Deny the renewal of existing sulfide-ore copper mining leases in the Superior National Forest;

2. Initiate a twenty-year withdrawal of federal land in the Rainy River Drainage Basin from disposition by leasing for the purpose of sulfide-ore copper mining;
3. Include within this withdrawal of federal lands a halt to all pending applications for new federal mineral leases and applications for new prospecting permits or the conversion of existing permits within the Superior National Forest.

The proximity of the 1.1 million acre BWCA to Voyageurs (220,000 acres) and Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park (1 million acres) results in a large-scale intact boreal forest ecosystem of international significance and inestimable value. The threat of contamination as a result of sulfide-ore mining in the Superior National Forest threatens all of these resources, including the potential for an international environmental crisis if Quetico Provincial Park were to be polluted as a result of federally sanctioned mining.

More than 500,000 people visit the BWCA and Voyageurs each year and these locations have emerged as crucial drivers of the economy in Northeastern Minnesota, where tourism supports 18,000 jobs and \$800 million in economic activity annually. The BWCA and Voyageurs are iconic emblems of Minnesota's outdoor recreation economy, which annually generates 118,000 direct jobs, \$11.6 billion in consumer spending, and \$815 million in state and local tax revenue.

Protecting these two Minnesota natural treasures for future generations of Americans should be one of the Obama Administration's legacy accomplishments. You all have my full support for immediate action to protect the BWCA and Voyageurs from a very real and urgent threat. I look forward to working closely with all of you to achieve our common goals of wise and appropriate resource management and environmental stewardship.

Sincerely,



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

cc: Under-Secretary Robert Bonnie, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Chief Thomas Tidwell, U.S. Forest Service
Chief of Staff Tommy Beaudreau, U.S. Department of the Interior
Deputy Assistant Secretary Jim Lyons, U.S. Department of the Interior
Director Neil Kornze, Bureau of Land Management