

Editorial: After seven years of delay, work may begin on U.P. nickel mine

The Detroit News

January 19, 2010

Kennecott Eagle Minerals Co. finally has won state approval for a nickel and copper mine in the Upper Peninsula. But environmental groups have vowed to continue fighting the decision, further holding up the jobs and local business revenue the mine will provide.

Another delay in the drawn-out process is exactly what the economically depressed U.P. doesn't need. It's already been seven years since Kennecott first announced the discovery of rich deposits of the metals in 2003 and began working with the state for permission to mine it.

This proposed project, like so many in Michigan, has pitted those who fear development against those who embrace it.

Environmentalists want to protect the remote Yellow Dog Plains area, where the mine is to be located northwest of Marquette. A chief contention is that sulfur-containing rocks brought to the surface during mining will cause acid drainage that will kill trout in the nearby Yellow Dog and Salmon Trout rivers.

The U.P.'s fish, wildlife and breathtaking scenery are sustainable assets drawing tourists and sportsmen with money to spend. Taking care of them obviously is crucial. Kennecott's proposal offers a fair balance between environmental protection and economic development.

Michigan had no specific regulations covering so-called sulfide mining when Kennecott first found the deposit containing an estimated 250 million to 300 million pounds of nickel and 200 million pounds of copper. The state subsequently adopted what Gov. Jennifer Granholm has described as the nation's toughest restrictions. The approval process has been long and arduous.

Kennecott's compliance efforts will include the construction of a state-of-the-art \$10-million water treatment plant.

The mine will employ about 200 workers making well above the area's median income of about \$36,600. Another 500 workers will be needed during the construction phase.

Copper carries the power that lights our homes and drives our industry. Nickel is increasingly in demand for production of stainless steel and the batteries critical to the budding boom in environmentally friendly hybrid cars, yet rare in the United States. This, in fact, will be the country's only nickel mine.

Senate Democratic Leader Mike Prusi, a former miner from Ishpeming, takes the position that anti-mining sentiments and lawsuits for too long delayed the creation of hundreds of new jobs. Unemployment ranges from 10.6 percent in Mackinac County to more than 25 percent in adjoining Baraga County.

Perhaps the years required for approval of the Kennecott project can be attributed partly to the fact that this is Michigan's first proposed sulfide mine. But the state has to do better in cultivating jobs in traditional industries. Opponents must stop blocking progress and let the U.P. have the jobs it badly needs.