

MILE POST 7 WEST RIDGE RAILROAD RELOCATION, DAM EXTENSIONS, AND STREAM MITIGATION PROJECT EAW
RECORD OF DECISION - ATTACHMENT A
FINDING OF FACT 13.b - COMMENT LETTER - DULUTH CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS



May 12, 2023

Bill Johnson
Environmental Review Unit
Ecological and Water Resources Division – Box 25
Minn. Dept. of Natural Resources
500 Lafayette Road N.
St. Paul, MN 55155-4025

VIA EMAIL

Environmentalrev.dnr@state.mn.us

RE: Mile Post 7 West Ridge Railroad Relocation, Dam Extensions, and Stream Mitigation Project – Environmental Assessment Worksheet

Dear Mr. Johnson:

As local elected officials for the City of Duluth, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Environmental Assessment Worksheet (“EAW”) for the Mile Post 7 West Ridge Railroad Relocation, Dam Extensions, and Stream Mitigation Project (“Mile Post 7 Expansion”) proposed by Northshore Mining Company. The Mile Post 7 tailings basin and proposed expansion are of significant importance to Duluth’s 1st, 2nd & 3rd Districts and our constituents.

Our greatest concern is the lack of information in the EAW regarding dam safety for the proposed Mile Post 7 Expansion. We ask DNR to ensure that the environmental effects of the proposal—including the safety of the dams and the environmental effects that would result from a collapse of the tailings basin’s dams—are fully vetted before a decision is made concerning Northshore Mining Company’s proposal.

It seems clear to us that a collapse of the Mile Post 7 tailings basin dams would have devastating environmental effects. The basin, a 2,000+ acre lake of pollution, is a short three miles uphill of Lake Superior. The effects of a collapse of that basin on the towns below—Beaver Bay and Silver Bay—would be disastrous. The tailings and water would flood into downstream waters, affecting water quality, fish and other aquatic life, wildlife, and the health and safety of nearby residents. A surge of the tailings into Lake Superior would have serious effects for cities like Duluth that depend on the lake for drinking water, in addition to effects on ecosystems and tourism.

In other words, the Mile Post 7 tailings basin exists because of the need to protect Lake Superior; decades of work would be undone in minutes by a dam collapse at the site. And yet, we cannot even say what the effects of a dam collapse might be—because we do not know. The subject has not been publicly studied since the environmental review in the 1970s, and even that study only looked briefly at the consequences of a partial dam collapse. We do not believe DNR should rely on a 40-year-old study, which was not done to modern standards, to assert that the tailings basin is



safe. We need public, unredacted information about the potential environmental effects of a dam breach—exactly what environmental review is required to do.

We are also concerned that DNR may already not be doing all it can to regulate the safety of the Mile Post 7 dams. The EAW indicates that DNR has not issued a dam safety permit for Mile Post 7 because the tailings basin predates the dam safety law. Requiring a dam safety permit would ensure a thorough review of the dam's safety and a public process that would fully disclose information about the dam to area residents who would be affected by a dam collapse.

Because of the potential for significant environmental effects from the Mile Post 7 facility and the Mile Post 7 Expansion, we ask that DNR perform additional environmental review on the subject of dam safety and environmental effects of a dam breach—either a supplement to the EAW or a full Environmental Impact Statement, and that DNR require a dam safety permit. This will help the public understand the safety of the dams and the effects from a potential collapse. Then, if needed, DNR can require more stringent safety measures at the site before reaching a decision on Northshore Mining's request to expand the tailings basin. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Gary Anderson

City Councilor, District 1

Mike Mayou

City Councilor, District 2

Roz Randorf

Council Vice President, District 3