

Proposed Mining Rule

As many of you know Maine's mining laws are up for revision, or at least that is what the legislature, perhaps at the behest of the Irving Company, wants to do. Irving has an interest in a heavy metal mining project on Bald Mountain in Aroostook County but says it cannot go forward on the state's overly stringent mining regulations. Senator Tom Saviello (R-Wilton) who is leading the revision effort, says the re write is all about bringing our regulatory into modern times and has nothing to do with making life easier for Irving. At the same time, he openly says that opening up Maine to the jobs this kind of project would bring, is a key motivator. As Chair of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee he is certainly a key player.

Last year, after a lot of work, an updated set of well thought out guidelines was passed by the legislature only to be vetoed by the governor. The legislature is now hard at the drawing board again. Tom insists he has a proposal that even NRCM will sign off on. Somehow making everyone happy is his avowed goal. At a local round table two weeks ago in Farmington he and Representative Andy Buckland (R-Farmington) made their case. Most of us in the room remained skeptical but we have not seen the final language of the bill.

Mining is a dirty business no matter how or where it is practiced, and the most modern of technologies are no guarantee of adequate environmental protection. Maine has been the site of some egregious mining activity, most notoriously the Brookville site in Hancock County. The NRCM website includes for details of more recent bad outcomes. Because it typically involves the exposure of large quantities highly toxic materials to ground water, it is hard to beat the environmental jeopardy of mining.

After the meeting Tom and I exchanged e mails. Here is the core of his argument:

"Steve, thank you for the email and for coming on Friday. As I said Friday my fundamental premise is if we are going to use metals in our rings, tools, cars, phones, computers.... we must not depend on third world countries to supply these needs. We must show the world it can be done right. I think our rewrite of the law and the rules will allow this to happen."

In other words, since we seem wedded to these gadgets and we want them cheap, we should pony up and relieve third world countries of the extractive burden.

I don't buy this in any number of ways. The endless waves of plastic electronics is much of what is wrong with our economy and indeed our relationship to goods. Should we feed this beast? At a purely economic level the reality is that metals are traded simply as commodities, so to compete it is all about price, and the only way to make something like this cheap is to externalize the hidden or less apparent environmental costs, which is exactly why out of the way places are chosen for this kind of industry.

My answer to Tom was:

"I do not share that view. I could be my own plumber but my time is far better spent at things I am good at. Likewise people, states, and nations are best off putting their resources into things they excel at. Extractive industries which despoil the landscape for the sake of a short term profit are often not good bets for communities. Mining would be a 19th century industry for a Maine that needs 21 century plans. Angus King once said no fish should leave Maine with its head on it, by which he meant that Maine

should focus not on simple extraction of resources but rather on value added processes. Simply, that is where the money is made. We should focus on our uniqueness and values in the global markets and put our energy there.

Our identity and brand, our economics and our culture depend on a state that values its landscape and landscape derived occupations. A few jobs for a few years does not defray the cost of putting that at risk.

The Irving mine, should it indeed occur, will yield a little money and a few jobs for a while but the environmental consequences will undoubtedly be long term. I remain very concerned despite your assurances that we will succumb to the decision making that thinks too short term. In the scheme of things what is that brook trout fishery worth and what price tag can we put on its jeopardy?"

Steve Bien, Jay