

WI Assembly Passes Contentious Mining Bill

TODD RICHMOND, Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Assembly Republicans scored a major victory Thursday in their push to help a Florida company dig a huge open-pit mine in Wisconsin's beloved north woods, passing a bill to ease the state's intricate permitting requirements despite conservationists' fears the project will devastate one of the state's most pristine regions.

The legislation has triggered one of the most intense environmental debates Wisconsin has seen in years. The bill's opponents worry the mining operation will unearth dangerous chemicals that will pollute the surrounding watershed and find their way into crystal-clear Lake Superior. But Republicans, looking for ways to deliver on campaign promises to create jobs, say the mine will generate hundreds of new positions and re-energize northwestern Wisconsin's flagging economy.

"This bill has a laser-like focus on job creation and prosperity for generations," Rep. Dan Knodl, R-Germantown, said. "The economic churn will begin almost immediately."

Democrats decried the measure as a corporate giveaway.

"If this is really about jobs, why didn't you write a good bill?" said Rep. Janet Bewley, an Ashland Democrat whose district includes the mine site. "And you're laughing. You're laughing at the people of the north."

The debate dragged on for nearly four-and-a-half hours before the measure passed 59-36 on a party-line vote. It goes next to the state Senate, but exactly what will emerge from that chamber is unclear.

Republicans hold only a one-vote majority in that house, and four GOP senators face potential recall elections this summer. Wary of stirring up any more anti-GOP anger that could ultimately cost them control, Senate Republicans have been treading cautiously on mining. A Senate committee formed in September to study mining issues has met only once, and the committee's chairman, Sen. Neal Kedzie, R-Elkhorn, said Thursday he has questions about whether the Assembly bill goes too far.

"I'm not here to criticize the Assembly bill. They're putting out a product they feel their members are able to support, but that doesn't mean we can't add additional ideas and make the legislation better," Kedzie said.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, among those targeted for recall, said something will emerge before the legislative session ends in mid-March.

"I don't see us leaving town without a mining bill passed out of the state Senate,"

WI Assembly Passes Contentious Mining Bill

Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

Fitzgerald said. "We've got to hustle."

Florida-based Gogebic Taconite wants to dig a miles-long open-pit iron mine in the Penokee Hills just south of Lake Superior and the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa's reservation. The company has promised the mine would create hundreds of new jobs across the economically depressed area and across the state in the Milwaukee area, home to a number of mining equipment manufacturers.

But company officials have put their plans on hold. They want legislators to guarantee a stopping point in the state's complex, open-ended permit application process.

Republicans have spent most of the last year working on legislation for the company. In December they unveiled a sweeping bill that would require the state Department of Natural Resources to approve an application within a year, eliminate contested case hearings — quasi-judicial proceedings that allow people and groups to challenge the DNR's permitting decisions — and bar anyone who isn't directly injured by a mining operation from bringing lawsuits alleging mining law or permit violations.

Conservationists insist the bill would ruin a huge swath of Wisconsin's cherished northwoods. They fear miners would unearth chemicals like mercury and lead that would seep into area trout streams and wetlands and eventually find their way into Lake Superior. The Bad River tribe in particular has raised concerns that mine pollution would wreck their traditional rice beds.

"What will we be leaving to that seventh generation?" tribal elder Joseph Rose said during a news conference Thursday. "Will there be clean water? Will there be fresh air? Will there be birds and animals?"

Gogebic Taconite President Bill Williams has dismissed opponents' criticism as fear-mongering. He said no one has conducted any chemical tests on the mine site's composition. He also said the company needs the Senate to move quickly.

"The rest of us in the real world have deadlines and goals to get the job done," he said. "If it ends in mid-March, we've lost another year. There's going to be a point in time when you've succeeded in chasing out a mining company by using delay tactics."

Debate in the Assembly was tense and messy.

Democrats and their allies are still fuming over Republican Gov. Scott Walker's collective bargaining law, which strips most public workers of almost all their union rights. The plan sparked massive protests at the state Capitol last year, and last week Democrats turned in nearly 2 million signatures to state election officials in hopes of forcing Walker, Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, Fitzgerald and the three other senators into recall elections.

Bands of hard-core demonstrators still gather in the Capitol daily to protest a

WI Assembly Passes Contentious Mining Bill

Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

variety of GOP proposals. On Thursday, they turned their wrath on the mining bill. They pounded a drum outside the Assembly chamber. They also gathered in the Assembly's overhead galleries and hurled obscenities under the cover of group coughs and throat-clearing.

Later they draped a banner over a gallery railing that read "Bury the Bill." Someone yelled out "Fascists!"

The display came hours after a handful of demonstrators heckled Walker during his State of the State speech in the same chamber Wednesday evening. Still stinging from the night before, Assembly President Pro Tem Bill Kramer, R-Waukesha, ordered police to remove all the spectators from the galleries.

"Great people," Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald, R-Horicon, Scott Fitzgerald's brother, yelled at a group of protesters. "A lot of class. A lot of class."

Undeterred, the protesters stood outside the chamber and screamed, "Shame! Shame! Shame!"

Source URL (retrieved on 01/29/2015 - 6:37am):

http://www.chem.info/news/2012/01/wi-assembly-passes-contentious-mining-bill?qt-most_popular=0