# Republicans Reintroduce Mining Changes

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MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Republican legislators reintroduced their plan Wednesday to streamline regulations they say drove a mining company to leave Wisconsin, reigniting one of the fiercest environmental debates the state has seen in decades.

The GOP has been working for more than a year to change the regulations in hopes of enticing Gogebic Taconite to open a huge open pit iron mine in far northwestern Wisconsin just south of Lake Superior. The region is starving for jobs and Republicans have made the mine the centerpiece of their economic agenda. But conservationists have rallied against the project, insisting it would devastate one of Wisconsin's last pristine areas.

Democrats contend any jobs the mine might create are years off, if they happen at all. Gogebic Taconite pulled out of the state last spring after a Republican bill died by a single vote in the Senate in March. The company is currently exploring in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Still, Democrats and Republicans think they can entice the company back to Wisconsin. A bipartisan committee worked this summer to come up with more palatable legislation and Republican Gov. Scott Walker called on the Legislature to pass a bill quickly during his State of the State address Tuesday evening, inviting union employees who might work at the mine to join him on the Assembly dais during the speech.

A beaming crowd of Assembly Republicans jammed a Wednesday morning news conference to introduce the bill, taping a sign that read "Mining for Jobs" on their podium. They sounded the same themes they've trumpeted for months, playing up mining's history in northern Wisconsin, pledging the bill wouldn't harm the environment and promising the legislation would set the stage for thousands of new mining-related jobs in the construction, service and manufacturing sectors.

"This affects our entire state," said Rep. Mark Honadel, R-South Milwaukee, one of the bill's authors. "The jobs and the job cycles that will be created ... will just be amazing."

The bill closely mirrors the measure that died in the Senate last year. Under the proposal, the state Department of Natural Resources would have up to 480 days to make a permitting decision. Right now the process is open-ended.

The public would no longer be allowed to challenge a DNR permitting decision through contested cases — quasi-judicial proceedings similar to trials — until after the decision is made. Citizen lawsuits challenging DNR enforcement of mining standards would be barred.

Any damage a mine causes to wetlands would be presumed necessary. A prohibition on mining operations filling lake beds would be eliminated. So would a prohibition on locating mining waste near lakes, ponds and rivers.

Passage this time around looks all but certain. Republicans control the Assembly 59-39 and the Senate 18-15 and have Walker in the governor's office.

Still, critics decried the measure as an environmental rollback. They said the bill is ripe for legal challenges that could delay the project and any jobs linked to it for years.

"This bill makes it less likely we'll ever get there," said Rep. Fred Clark, D-Baraboo. "It's a hopelessly rosy scenario."

Sen. Tim Cullen, D-Janesville said he was disappointed Republicans didn't incorporate any ideas the bipartisan mining committee he formed over the summer offered. He plans to introduce his own bill on Friday.

The GOP's measure lowers water quality protections, he said, creating conflict with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has jurisdiction over federal wetlands in the state. The GOP also will run into problems with the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, who fiercely opposed the last bill out of concerns the mine would pollute their treasured wild rice sloughs, he predicted.

"(The Republican) bill will not increase the chances of mining by one day," he said.

The voicemail for Bad River tribal chairman Mike Wiggins, Jr. was full Wednesday afternoon and wouldn't accept messages.

A coalition of conservation groups that includes the Sierra Club and Trout Unlimited released a statement urging lawmakers to reject any changes to mining law, calling the mine plans "the most destructive industrial project the state has ever faced."

"We remind legislators that they represent all of Wisconsin's citizens and the clean air and water we rely on, not one mining company with a hugely destructive proposal," Dave Blouin, chairman of the Sierra Club's Wisconsin chapter's mining committee, said in the statement.

Bob Walesewicz, chairman of the Iron County town of Carey, which lies near the mine site, told reporters during the Republican news conference that iron mining went on in northwestern Wisconsin for decades and the environment remains unspoiled.

"Wisconsin is a working landscape and mining is part of our heritage," he said. "Isn't there some value in the experience we've had so far with mining? Our families are healthy. Our water is clear. We drink it every day."

He then turned to the dozens of Republicans flanking him.

"The workers," he said, "need your vote."

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