Tribe Threatens Governor’s Jobs Project

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ODANAH, Wis. (AP) — For generations the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa has quietly carved out a hardscrabble existence in the evergreen forests and sloughs along what people here call the Big Water, living off wild rice, fish and game.

Little has changed over the decades. They grapple with poverty every day. Their casino is tiny, their homes aging and weather-beaten. But they have their land and their water and that's always been enough.

Now, though, tribal members find themselves in the path of a major effort to create new jobs in Wisconsin. Their lifestyle may turn out to be the most formidable obstacle yet for a Republican governor determined to show that he can ramp up the state's economy.

Gov. Scott Walker and the Republican-controlled Legislature are pushing to bring a huge iron mine to the Bad River's doorstep and revive an industry that has been dormant for nearly 50 years. Conservationists fear the mine would pollute the area, but supporters disagree and are fast-tracking a bill to clear the way.

In his two years in office, Walker has rolled over his Democratic adversaries and beaten a recall attempt, but he now faces a different kind of opponent. Though only 1,000 members live on the reservation, the tribe has legal status as a sovereign nation and could tie up the project in court, depriving Walker of his signature job creation achievement as he prepares for re-election.

"We're not going to let it happen," tribal elder Joe Rose Sr. said. "The (Chippewa) tradition is to look seven generations ahead. We ask ourselves what we're leaving for those unborn. Will there be clean water and air? Will there be any pristine wilderness left?"

The issue has inflamed the tension between the state's beloved outdoor traditions and the need for paychecks. Many residents of the surrounding counties, where unemployment ranges up to 12 percent, have latched onto promises of hundreds of jobs on-site; backers say there would be thousands more for heavy equipment manufacturers and suppliers across the state.

"Everybody's broke around here," said Ken Scribner, a 47-year-old unemployed construction worker from Mellen, a town of about 800 people on the mine site's western edge. "We need some money."

How the collision of cultures can be resolved, short of years of litigation, is unclear.

Northwestern Wisconsin is a different world than Milwaukee, the state's largest city and a manufacturing hub. This is an untamed place, laced with secluded lakes, snow-frosted forests, swamps and towns separated by miles of lonely two-lane roads.

Iron mining was once the area's lifeblood, but the last mine closed in 1965 as the steel industry shifted to lower-grade ore. The region's economy has limped along ever since, relying on tourism even as abandoned buildings and mounds of waste rock served as forlorn reminders of better days.

Now, though, mining company Gogebic Taconite is considering a new mine in the Penokee Hills, which stretch from the northern Wisconsin woods to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Plans call for blasting away 4½ miles of ridge line to create a massive pit mine. The company hopes to ship ore to take advantage of rising domestic prices.

The Legislature is poised to limit public challenges and allow mining operations to store waste near lakes, ponds and rivers. The measure also contains a general presumption that any damage to wetlands is necessary.

Walker, who has been struggling to deliver on a campaign pledge to create 250,000 new jobs before he launches his 2014 re-election bid, extolled the project in his recent State of the State address. He even surrounded himself with hard-hatted union members he said want to work at the mine during the speech.

But the Bad River reservation lies just north of the mine site, where the Bad River empties into Lake Superior. According to lore, the tribe settled in the forests and marshes here long before European settlers arrived because the wild rice fulfilled a prophecy that the tribe's wanderings would end when it found food growing on water.

Most of the tribe's weathered houses and mobile homes and its casino, one of the state's smallest, sit in the woods along U.S. Highway 2 about 80 miles east of Duluth, Minn. Per capita income was $12,352, according to the latest Census Bureau estimates.

But tribal leaders hold fast to their connection with the natural world. Signs on the reservation's borders inform travelers the land is sacred, and tribal members still rely on the land for sustenance.

"The view you get here is the view your ancestors had," tribal chairman Mike Wiggins Jr. said as he scrolled through photos of the reservation's beaches and spectacular sunsets on his laptop. "These things really do matter."

Tribal leaders fear run-off from mine waste will poison the watershed with sulfuric acid and sulfates. Democrats and conservationists agree. A Lawrence University study conducted on behalf of the state's Chippewa tribes concluded that the waste rock could generate acidic run-off, but state officials say there hasn't been an authoritative analysis.

As a sovereign nation under U.S. government treaties, the tribe could ask the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce the reservation's own water quality standards if a mining permit doesn't meet them. Under a federal treaty signed in 1837, the state also must consult the tribe about actions affecting its hunting and fishing rights.

The bill's author, Republican Sen. Tom Tiffany, sought a meeting with Wiggins in December, but Wiggins replied it would be pointless.

Republicans have acknowledged the matter could well end up in court. But Tiffany said he believes the state will be on solid legal ground in balancing the economy with the environment.

The locals are growing impatient. Leslie Kolesar, chairwoman of the Iron County local mining impact committee, said the county has been living with mining residue for years and nobody is sick. To illustrate, she filled a Mason jar with water from a stream running near a rock pile and slugged it down.

"We're not afraid," she said, adding, "We're still drinking the water, still eating the fish out of the rivers."

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