Wisconsin Assembly Passes Sweeping Mining Bill

TODD RICHMOND,Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Republicans in the Wisconsin Assembly approved a polarizing mining bill Thursday and sent the measure to Gov. Scott Walker for his signature, completing a long push to help a Florida company open a giant iron mine on the shore of Lake Superior over environmentalists' objections.

The Assembly passed the measure 58-39 after nearly nine-and-a-half hours of debate. The state Senate approved the plan last week. Walker, a Republican who has touted the bill as his signature job-creation plan, has promised to sign it into law.

Wisconsin Republicans have been working for nearly two years to help Gogebic Taconite launch its project in the Penokee Hills just south of Lake Superior. The company has refused to move forward until lawmakers ease their regulatory path.

The bill would make sweeping changes to state mining regulations, including setting a 480-day deadline on a permitting decision, prohibiting public challenges until after a permit has been granted and exempting mining companies from paying the state's recycling fee on waste materials.

Republicans say Gogebic's project will create hundreds of jobs around the mine and thousands more for heavy equipment manufacturers across the rest of the state.

Environmentalists, though, say the bill clears the way for the mine to pollute one of the last pristine areas in the state. They appear poised to challenge the legislation in court. The Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, whose reservation lies just north of the mine site where the Bad River empties into Lake Superior, could pose a potent legal roadblock.

The tribe fears runoff from mine waste will poison the watershed with sulfuric acid and sulfates. As a sovereign nation, the tribe could ask the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to enforce the reservation's own water quality standards if a mining permit doesn't meet them.

Tribal leaders also have repeatedly complained they've been left out of mining discussions. That could help them make a case that state lawmakers violated treaty conditions that require them to consult with the Bad River on any actions that affect the tribe's hunting and fishing rights.

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