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**KELLY GORDON:** This is Minnesota Now, I'm Kelly Gordon in today for Nina Moini. The US Senate could vote today on legislation that would roll back protections against mining in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. If passed, this would overturn a 20 year ban on mining across more than 200,000 acres of the Superior National Forest that was put in place in 2023. Here's US Senator Tina Smith talking about the legislation on the floor earlier this week.

**TINA SMITH:** And I want to speak directly to my Republican colleagues about this CRA and why you should vote against it. This CRA would roll back protections for the Boundary Waters Wilderness in Northeastern Minnesota. It would allow copper, nickel, sulfide mining in the watershed of the Boundary Waters, which would be devastating.

**KELLY GORDON:** The measure, which was headed by Minnesota Republican Congressman Pete Stauber, passed the House back in January but has stalled in the Senate since. Chris Knopf is the executive director of Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, he joins me now to talk more about this possible vote and what it could mean. Hi, Chris.

**CHRIS KNOPF:** Good afternoon, Kelly. Thank you so much for having me.

**KELLY GORDON:** Of course. So this measure passed the House several months ago, as we said. So tell us what's been happening with it in the Senate.

**CHRIS KNOPF:** Right now it's been stalled in the Senate. The Republican members are trying to get the votes in order to pass it, and so far, they have not been able to get those votes. But they're trying right now to get the votes and it may very well come up for a vote later this afternoon or tonight. So this legislation, as Senator Smith said, would remove existing protections on over 225,000 acres right next to the Boundary Waters that provide protections from copper, nickel, sulfide mining.

And what happens is that since water flows downhill, mining on these lands would pollute the Boundary Waters because the pollution would flow into the Boundary Waters and it's different from traditional taconite mining. It's a sulfide mining that produces sulfuric acid that is poisonous to wildlife, puts mercury in the water, and kills wild rise.

**KELLY GORDON:** And also, have the Democrats been trying to stall it for a reason? Is there a deadline? I like I've heard something about the end of April of this month.

**CHRIS KNOPF:** That's exactly right. So what is happening with this legislation, never before used legislative maneuver that applies something called the Congressional Review Act. And the importance of that is that it has to be reviewed by the US Senate within 60 US Senate days, which are not the same as calendar days, but they're 60 days in which the Senate is in session.

And right now that time period is set to expire in less than two weeks. So we're trying to run out the clock now, but that clock is set to expire on April 24 right now. So if the Senate does not act by then, by that inaction, this legislation would not pass and those protections would remain in place.

**KELLY GORDON:** Representative Pete Stauber has said that this ban was an attack on the mining way of life in the region. So what's your response to that?

**CHRIS KNOPF:** Yeah, it's absolutely not. What it is attack on our clean water heritage and the thousands and thousands of people that earn their living from the outdoor economy here. As I said, this type of mining has never been done before, so it's much different than taconite mining.

Simply, this is a highly automated industry, and there would not be many jobs from this that it's highly automated. There's a 400 ton automated driverless truck that's used in the mines in Chile, and that's what they would use here, driverless trucks. And there are no jobs with a driverless truck.

**KELLY GORDON:** So if this does pass in the Senate with a vote maybe today or tonight, I know that President Donald Trump is expected to sign off on it. So can you talk a little bit about what companies have already have proposals in place to take advantage of this being lifted, if it does, in fact happen?

**CHRIS KNOPF:** Sure. This legislation is primarily to benefit a Chilean mining conglomerate called Antofagasta that has proposed that Twin metals pass a copper, nickel, sulfide mine right at the edge of the Boundary Waters along the South Kawishiwi River and Birch Lake. And so this legislation would be a gift to Twin metals.

And so what needs to be done in response to that is that here in Minnesota, we in Minnesota must stand up for Minnesota. And so our Minnesota legislature must pass laws that protect our waters from this type of pollution. So we in Minnesota, Kelly, have not had a hearing on the threats from copper, nickel, sulfide mining since 2009.

And so it is really incumbent upon our elected officials and all the citizens here in Minnesota to demand that our legislators take action. In addition to that, our Minnesota Department of Natural Resources right now can cancel one of the state mineral leases that Twin metals that this Chilean owned company has right now along Birch Lake in the South Kawishiwi River. That would be the first step that we can take right now, without any legislative action, without federal action.

Our Minnesota DNR can take action and cancel one of the state mineral leases that this Chilean mining company has, along Birch Lake and the South Kawishiwi River. So we need to stand up for ourselves here in Minnesota, just as we have done for the last several months against the federal government.

**KELLY GORDON:** I mean, if this does pass, how do you see your work in the future when it comes to protecting the Boundary waters? And is it possible that new bands could be put in place if this measure does pass?

**CHRIS KNOPF:** Sure. We're working very hard at the state level as well as at the federal level. So we are actually working with Minnesota legislators to change the course of action at our state level. So we are looking forward to next year to pass legislation that protects the Boundary Waters.

Our organization was founded 50 years ago. So we're coming up on our 50th anniversary in less than a month here. And this is what we've done for the last 50 years, Kelly, is we've met every threat to the Boundary Waters in the half century that we've been in existence. And so this is just the latest threat and every generation needs to stand up for the Boundary Waters. And that's what we're doing today and we'll do in the future.

**KELLY GORDON:** Real quick, Chris, how likely is this to come to a vote today because I know I've seen a flurry of activity online because people were concerned that it was actually happening? Do you have any sense on if it is going to?

**CHRIS KNOPF:** I just spoke with Tina Smith's office right before this interview, and it is likely to come up. It may be this evening. There are a few things before that, so if not this afternoon, it may come up as late as 8 o'clock tonight. So we are actively monitoring this.

We have thousands of phone calls coming in from our supporters from across the country. It's our hope that our phone calls will make a difference. And if not, stop at least postpone a vote on this. So everyone who loves the Boundary Waters, we're asking them to call US senators from across the country right now and put pressure on our elected officials because clean water, protection of the Boundary Waters is a bipartisan issue.

**KELLY**  
**GORDON:** Thank you. We've been speaking with Chris Knopf from Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness. Thank you, Chris.