



United States Department of Agriculture

Forest Service

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FOREST SERVICE MOVING FORWARD WITH ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS FOR PROPOSED MINERAL WITHDRAWAL ON SUPERIOR NATIONAL FOREST

DULUTH, MN (January 26, 2018) – After receiving more than 90,000 comments during a 210-day public scoping period, the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, with the United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as a cooperating agency, will prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) to study the effects of a proposed withdrawal on the Superior National Forest. The Forest Service will cancel the Notice of Intent published in January 2017, which originally announced the agency's intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Based on comments received, and Council on Environmental Quality guidance, the Forest Service will conduct an EA due to the absence of significant environmental impacts identified during the scoping period. If the EA analysis reveals significant environmental impacts, the Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and the public will be invited to participate in that process.

“While the science indicates significant environmental impacts are unlikely to result from the proposed withdrawal, I am deeply aware of the controversy regarding socio-economic implications,” said Superior National Forest Supervisor Connie Cummins. “Our specialists are working hard to ensure the EA accurately describes all the facts of the proposal, to aid the Secretary of the Interior in his decision.”

Although the official comment period for scoping is complete, in an effort to ensure substantial opportunities for interested members of the public to share their views on the proposed withdrawal, the Forest Service will accept additional public comment until February 28, 2018. Comments received will be considered in development of the EA, and included in the project record delivered to the BLM once the EA is complete. To ensure timely receipt and consideration in the environmental assessment, comments must be received no later than midnight, February 28, 2018 and should be submitted via the project's website at <http://go.usa.gov/xnfQh>, by selecting “Comment/Object to Project” link on the right hand side of the page.

Previous comments submitted during project scoping represented the full range of public sentiment, from strong support to strong opposition. The Forest Service is using the information received in comments along with a review of environmental, social and economic information to prepare the EA. The BLM is responsible for ensuring the analysis and documentation address DOI regulations. The BLM will determine if there is a Finding of No Significant Impact. The Forest Service expects to complete the EA by late 2018 ensuring enough time for consideration by the BLM and Secretary of the Interior before the current mineral segregation expires in January 2019.

Once complete, the EA will be used by the BLM to develop a recommendation on the withdrawal to the Secretary of the Interior. Announced by the Forest Service in January 2017, the proposal seeks to withdraw approximately 234,000 acres of the Superior National Forest from mineral leasing actions for 20 years. Authority to approve the proposal lies solely with the Secretary of the Interior.

The proposed withdrawal is based on the January 5, 2017 Forest Service application to the BLM proposing a 20-year mineral withdrawal of 234,328 acres of national forest system lands from disposition under United States mineral and geothermal leasing laws. The proposed withdrawal does not apply to valid existing mineral rights, private lands, private mineral estates, private fractional minerals interests, or sand, gravel or stone quarries. The proposed withdrawal area is adjacent to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and to the Mining Protection Area, and is located within the Rainy River watershed on the Superior National Forest. Acceptance of the proposal by the BLM initiated a two-year mineral segregation, preventing new mineral leasing actions within the proposal area while the Forest Service and BLM complete an environmental study of the proposal. If the withdrawal is not approved, the segregation will end January 5, 2019 and mineral leasing actions may resume.

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