

JS On-line, Wide-ranging bill pits business against green interests (24 Oct 11)

Environmentalists say wide-ranging legislation that gets a public hearing on Wednesday in Madison would weaken air and water protections and serve as a backdoor attempt to ease mining regulations in Wisconsin.

The bill is sure to draw sharp differences between business and environmental interests - and a similar battle is expected on Thursday when an Assembly panel meets in Hurley to discuss making changes to state mining laws.

The impetus: a proposed \$1.5 billion iron ore mine in Iron and Ashland counties that proponents say would be a catalyst for the region's economy, but which environmental groups warn could cause damage to waters stretching to Lake Superior.

Gogebic Taconite put its mining project on hold in June until Wisconsin could provide a more certain regulatory picture.

Pro-mining forces say Wisconsin needs to treat iron-ore regulation differently from metallic mining, which traditionally poses greater environmental threats.

The hearing in Hurley is aimed at finding ways to promote mining without harming the environment, but lawmakers or the public won't be commenting on specific proposals - no iron-ore mining legislation has been introduced, to date.

And whether the legislation before Wednesday's joint meeting of the natural resources committees of the Assembly and Senate is about mining in particular is a matter of dispute.

The bill would modify water regulations, change the way residents receive public notices and prompt quicker environmental reviews by the state Department of Natural Resources.

Cullen Werwie, spokesman for Gov. Scott Walker, called the bill a "DNR regulatory reform package" that has nothing to do with mining.

Deputy DNR Secretary Matt Moroney said that his agency provided extensive input, especially from employees who suggested to Moroney and other Walker appointees that the agency needed more streamlining.

Is it a mining bill?

"Absolutely not," Moroney said. "I'm not seeing it there. I am not seeing any backdoor mining efforts in this."

But environmental groups and others attacked the measure on several fronts, including a proposal to rely on the Internet to issue public notices.

The Wisconsin Newspaper Association also took issue with the electronic notifications. A resident, for example, could be oblivious that someone was proposing to build along a public waterway, but could come across the public notice in the newspaper, said Beth Bennett, the group's executive director.

Moroney said the DNR plans to upgrade the use of GovDelivery so the public can set up the service to receive emails on specific issues.

Rep. Brett Hulse (D-Madison) said pro-mining interests seem to want to speed up water and wetland permits, but said there is no sign that the DNR is dragging its feet. He cited data from the DNR showing the agency approved 98% of 77,713 permit applications in the past 20 years.

As for mining, environmentalists said the changes would ease the way for Gogebic Taconite to construct an open pit mine in the Penokee range between Upson and Mellen.

Examples:

Limiting the number of so-called areas of special natural resource interest, such as trout streams, could make it easier to build on sensitive land. The mine would be located in an area of extensive wetlands, streams and rivers.

A company would no longer need to perform computer modeling to ensure compliance with air pollution rules. Gogebic is proposing to build a large processing plant to concentrate iron ore into pellets for making steel.

More use of "general" permits to build near waterways - permits that are generally less rigorous and require less public notice.

"These are the kinds of things that a mining operation needs to build a large strip mine in northern Wisconsin," said Anne Sayers, program director of the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters.