



Ms. Emily Schmitz
Community Development Director
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Cottage Grove, MN 55016

January 16, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Nelson Mine Backwater Project. Dakota County has concerns about the impact of the proposed project on the health of the Mississippi River, and on the visitor experience to the adjacent Spring Lake Regional Park Reserve, managed by Dakota County.

Context

This segment of the Mississippi River is designated the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) by the National Park Service. The preferred mining site is immediately adjacent to Spring Lake Park Reserve, an important park that Dakota County and the metropolitan region have invested millions of dollars of public funding to restore natural areas, interpret cultural history, and install recreational facilities.

Noise Impacts on Spring Lake Park Reserve's Nature-Based Recreation

Dakota County is concerned that constant noise from the river mining dredge will impact the experience of regional park reserve visitors. The draft EIS states that noise from the dredge, primary crusher, and sorting screens will be generated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 9 months of the year. While the loud noise generated from the dredge may not be as loud when it reaches Spring Lake Park Reserve, it will be continuous. The draft EIS compares the noise from the dredge to that from occasional trains, river traffic, and airplanes overhead, but the noise from the dredge will not cease. It will compete with the quiet sounds of bird calls and nature observance. A continuous noise from an industrial facility is incompatible with the quiet setting of the park reserve. Analysis should be conducted to determine the sound level at various locations within Spring Lake Park Reserve, and compared to appropriate standards or guidelines for quiet, contemplative and natural areas. *If mining is permitted, it should be conducted in a manner that is not audible from Spring Lake Park Reserve.*

Visual Impacts

Schaar's Bluff is less than 2,000 feet from the preferred mine site. The view from the bluff frames the river valley today but will end up framing the proposed mining operation. This popular view, the park's most prominent feature, will be significantly altered. As visitors look out over the river vistas, the mining dredge and conveyor system will be visible despite being partially screened by the barrier islands. The EIS indicates that

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the mining dredge will be a constant feature, unlike a passing boat or train. *If the mining operation is permitted, the area where the dredge and mining equipment operate should be limited to locations that are out of view of Schaar's Bluff and visitors at Spring Lake Regional Park Reserve.*

Visual and Noise Impacts at Pine Bend Bluff Trailhead

The Pine Bend Bluff Trailhead is located at the Pine Bend Bluffs Scientific Natural Area immediately west of the Baldwin Lake site (alternative C). The Mississippi River Greenway trail leads from the Pine Bend Trailhead to overlook Baldwin Lake and mining would be visible and perhaps audible from this location. Again, analysis should be conducted to determine the sound level at the trailhead and compared to appropriate standards or guidelines for quiet, contemplative and natural areas. *If the mining operation is permitted at Baldwin Lake, views and sounds should be mitigated to limit impacts to this overlook location.*

Light Pollution in the River Valley

The lights of the dredge will be intrusive to wildlife and to visitors of Spring Lake Park Reserve. As proposed, the lights from the dredge will be prominently visible in what is today a relatively dark river valley. Spring Lake Park Reserve has existing overnight camping facilities and planned campsites on the islands next to the proposed mine. *Overnight mining and associated light pollution in the river valley should be significantly mitigated or not permitted.*

Impacts on Wildlife and the Mississippi River

The Mississippi River is an important flyway for migratory birds. Impacts from the mining to nesting and feeding habitats will be significant. The draft EIS states that wildlife will be displaced. Displacing wildlife is counter to the purpose of Spring Lake Park Reserve and the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. These are locations that people visit to view wildlife. Dakota County has recently re-established a bison herd at Spring Lake Park Reserve using State and County funding. The draft EIS does not adequately evaluate the extent to which the river and its aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems will be impacted.

A 200' underwater mine is an unnatural condition in the upper Mississippi River and the impacts of a deep mine that is hydrologically connected to the river channel are unknown and irreversible, even after some of the unused sand is returned to the pit. In addition, silting downstream from both the dredging activity and the filling of the pit with the unused product may cause issues for benthic invertebrates (such as mussels) and fish habitat downstream. *More study is needed to evaluate the impacts to wildlife and the river ecosystem, and whether mitigation for this atypical mining proposal is possible.*

Recreational Impacts on Boaters and Campers on Spring Lake

The Spring Lake Park Reserve Master Plan includes a boat launch, kayak trail, and island campsites. *These regional park visitor activities will be negatively impacted by the proposed river dredge mining proposal.*

Potential Upstream Flooding

The draft EIS proposes the use of barrier islands to partially surround the mining operation and divert river flow. *More study is needed to ensure that alterations to the river hydrology do not impact flooding to Dakota County's upstream communities.*

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Alternative D: Upland Mining in Rosemount and Vermillion Township, Responsible Government Unit

The draft EIS includes an alternate 600-acre upland mining site in central Dakota County. The City of Rosemount and/or Vermillion Township should be the Responsible Government Unit (RGU) for this alternative and have the opportunity to conduct appropriate local public engagement and review. *Should alternative D be considered, a new draft EIS should be prepared with either Rosemount or Vermillion Township as the RGU.*

Alternative D: Transportation Issues

The Draft EIS (Page 3-14) states that aggregate mined under Alternative D would be transported by truck to existing customers, an average of approximately 25 miles away. This would result in approximately 6,900 new truck trips per year generated, primarily on Trunk Highway (TH) 52 and I-494. *Please identify how these trips will gain access to TH 52. Will access be via County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 46? If so, how many trips will use the county highway?*

The Traffic and Transportation fact sheet differs from the previous text in that it identifies 30,000 annual truck trips. This figure is significantly larger than the trips identified on page 3-14 and should be clarified.

Please provide answers to the following County traffic concerns when developing the EIS:

- *What are the actual intended patterns and trip estimates throughout the day?*
- *Will trips be evenly distributed throughout the day or concentrated at peak times?*
- *Will trips be evenly distributed throughout the year or concentrated seasonally?*
- *How many site accesses are anticipated?*
- *Will CSAH 46 be the primary access and route to the regional system or are other roadways and routes anticipated?*

The draft EIS (pages 4-281 to 282) states “The existing transportation network within the Alternative D Project area is largely expected to be able to accommodate the additional transportation from the proposed development, though the need for traffic improvements such as turn lanes, acceleration lanes, etc. is yet to be determined. The County Road 46 Project demonstrates the continued investment in this location and planned expansion of the surrounding highways.” *Please provide a traffic impact study (TIS) that includes specific mitigation measures detailing improvements required for the county highway as a result of this development proposal. The proposed development will be responsible for any required through lanes, left turn or bypass lanes, and acceleration lanes beyond programmed County improvements or prior to scheduled County improvements. The TIS should include analysis of the following CSAH 46 intersections for the Alternative D proposed and alternative mining areas. This includes identification of 24-hour traffic volumes at existing intersections.*

- *CSAH 46 and TH 52 (all ramps)*
- *CSAH 46 and County Road (CR) 48 (160th Street East within Coates)*
- *CSAH 46 and Emery Avenue*
- *CSAH 46 and CSAH 85 (Goodwin Avenue)*
- *CSAH 46 and proposed access locations to the site*

Alternative D: Groundwater Issues

The Alternative D Project Area is partially located in the highly vulnerable City of Hastings Drinking Water Supply Management Area. In addition, there are many wells in Alternative D that would need to be sealed should mining occur in that area. Permits would be required for any new wells or well sealings in the area.

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Consider locating any sources of contaminants associated with the proposed processing facility, load yard, office space and associated parking outside of the Hastings DWSMA.

Alternative D: Environmental Issues

No known or suspected environmental concerns were identified on the subject property. SKB Environmental – SKB Rosemount Industrial Waste Facility, is located northwest. The Furlong Gravel Pit, sand and gravel mining area is in the southeast parcel of this property. Xcel Energy, Inc electric transmission lines cross the southwest parcel of the property. *These land uses may need additional evaluation to determine compatibility with the Alternative D proposal..*

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Nelson Mine Backwater Project.

If you have any questions relating to our comments, please contact me at 952-891-7007 or Georg.Fischer@co.dakota.mn.us

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Georg T. Fischer', is positioned above the typed name.

Georg T Fischer, Director
Physical Development Division

cc: Commissioner Mike Slavik, District 1
Commissioner William Droste, District 4
Heidi Welsch County Manager

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