



DAVE BALLARD / NEWS-TRIBUNE

Walt Bresette stands beside four Wisconsin Central rail cars loaded with sulfuric acid bound for the White Pine Copper Mine. Bresette claims the acid could cause an environmental disaster.

Acid mining in the Northland: Tough choice between jobs and potential pollution

Greens protest train, method

By John Myers
News-Tribune staff writer

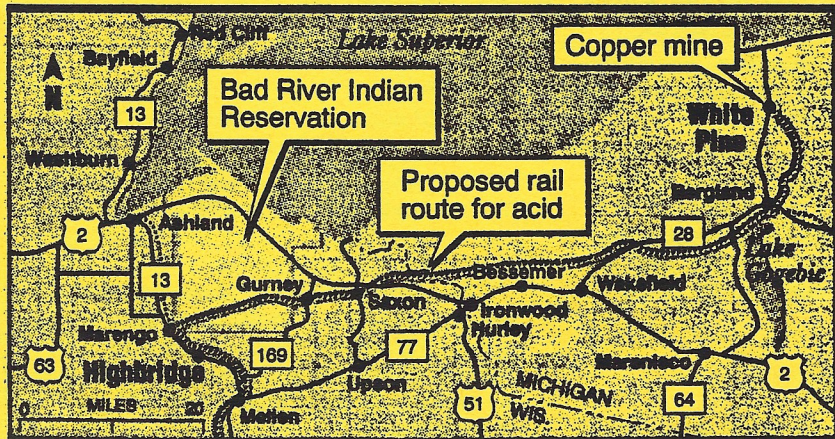
HIGHBRIDGE, Wis. — Walt Bresette eyed four Wisconsin Central train cars parked on a side track here, each laden with 14,000 gallons of sulfuric acid.

He's worried that a railroad that has had accidents before, including one that spurred the evacuation of Weyauwega in central Wisconsin, might lose a tanker of acid into a river or wetland from — what appears to him and other observers to be — rickety tracks.

"You can't tell me that mixture won't be leaking out."

Walt Bresette

But what's really worrying Bresette, an Ojibwe activist from Bayfield, and other environmentalists is where this sulfuric acid is headed, what it's



News-Tribune Graphics

being used for and how much of it is coming.

Up to 550 million gallons of the sulfuric acid is headed for the Copper Range Company's mine in White Pine in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The acid will be mixed with water and injected into underground mine shafts to leach out copper. The project is in preliminary stages.

If the project is successful, as much as 11 billion gallons of the acid/water solution will be pumped into the mine over the next 20 years.

A group on the Bad River Chippewa Reservation Monday morning lit a sacred fire next to the tracks and began

Please see ACID, Page 5A

four days of spiritual ceremony. Leaders from the Bad River Ojibwe band and others are considering legal action to stop the trains from rolling.

Without the acid mining, the mine's owners say they can't keep operations open and the town's only major employer would be shuttered, leaving White Pine an economic disaster.

With the acid, environmentalists predict a water pollution disaster sometime in the next 50 years — an oozing mix of salty brine, acid and heavy metals seeping out of the mine to kill the adjacent Mineral River and destroy lake trout spawning beds in Lake Superior just five miles downstream.

The acid mining project was approved May 28 by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, which says it is environmentally sound, despite the concerns of Indian natural resource groups, the National Wildlife Federation and even the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

In a 21-page list of concerns to the state, the EPA noted the acid project will lead to the creation of a federal "hazardous waste site," in the mine and that levels of metals such as arsenic, cadmium, boron, ammonia and chloride all will be present in the mine in violation of the state's own water quality standards.

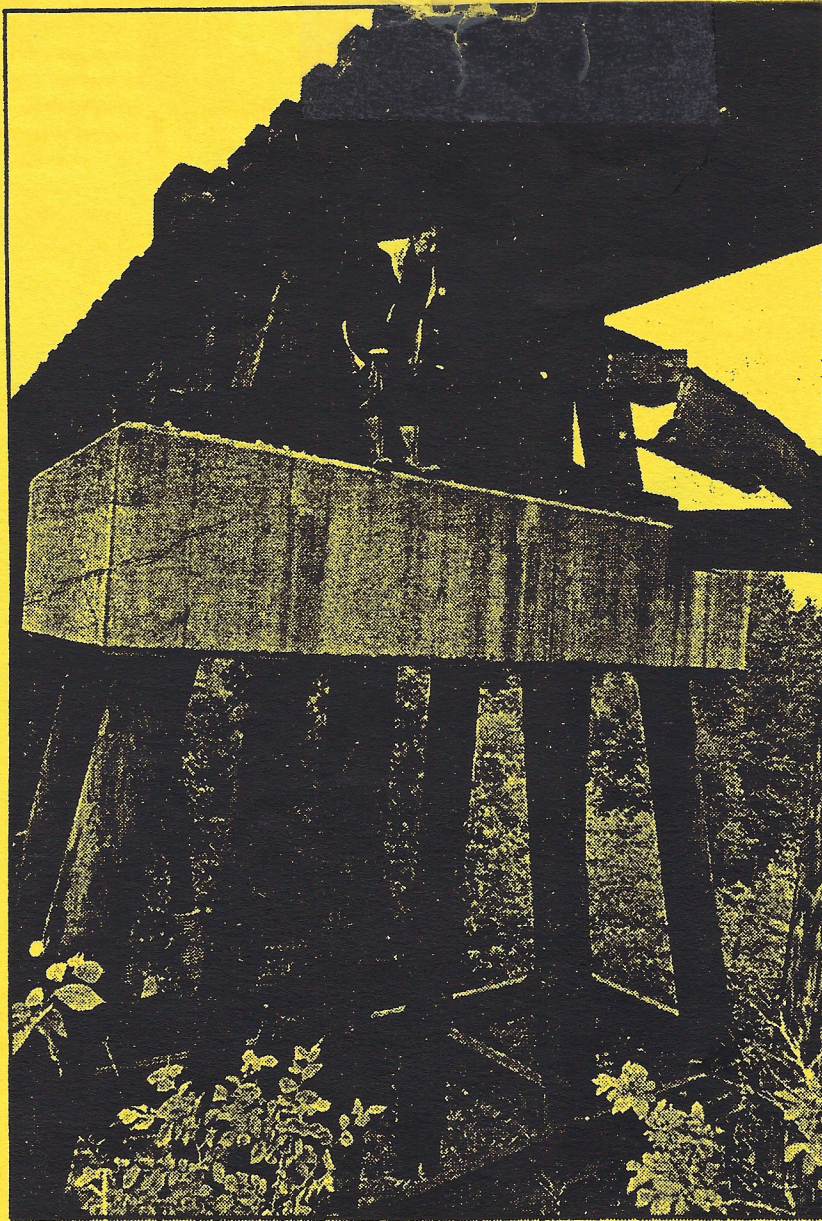
The EPA says there are no assurances the hazardous waste site ever would be cleaned up.

Despite the regional EPA office's concerns, the federal agency so far hasn't stepped in to stop or change the project, something environmentalists and Indian bands may go to court to force.

Polluted past

Copper has been mined near White Pine since 1899, with more than 4 billion pounds of the metal taken out of the mine. The mine opened in 1953, providing hundreds of high-paying jobs for four decades. It closed in 1984, but reopened in 1985 in an employee buy-out. In 1989, Toronto-based Inmet purchased it.

The mine has been dogged by environmental groups and federal regulators for failing to comply with air and water pollution rules.



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Ojibwe activist Walt Bresette stands under a railroad bridge that spans Trout Brook near Highbridge. He fears the bridge is too rickety to handle trains of sulfuric acid headed for a copper mine in Michigan. Railroad regulators have ruled the tracks safe as long as the trains go no faster than 10 mph. The railroad will tow carloads of limestone along with the train to help neutralize any spills.

In early 1995, the company agreed to a \$200 million settlement, the largest ever under the federal Clean Air Act, to upgrade its smelter to meet environmental standards.

Copper Range Co. paid another \$1.8 million in fines and spent \$3 million to restore mercury-damaged fish and wildlife habitat.

The massive underground mine shut down again last September with the company saying traditional mining methods were no longer profitable. Nearly 1,200 people lost their jobs and a \$60 million annual economic generator for the region was turned off.

Now the company wants to resume mining — not with heavy equipment, but with sulfuric acid.

The company would inject a mixture of 5 percent acid and 95 percent water into rubble underground. The rubble would come from blasted rock in dug-out caverns, 2,800 feet underground.

They would then suck the mixture back up to the surface, where the copper can be sifted out and smelted.

The used, diluted sulfuric acid solution would be pumped back into the giant underground mine shafts where it would sit, forever, held in by concrete bulkheads.

Acid mining a tough choice:

Duluth
News-
Tribune
Tues.
July 23
1996

But EPA authorities say those bulkheads have a history of failing. And in its report on the project, the EPA says it's not clear the solution won't flow out of the mine.

Bresette worries. "One hundred years from now, the Mineral River and many acres of Lake Su-

perior will not support life ... and our great-, great-grandchildren will wonder what we were thinking when the acid spigot was turned on in the summer of 1996."

New kind of mining

It's called acid solution mining, and it's the first time it's been tried in the Northland.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality note that the company has posted a \$1 million letter of credit for the preliminary stage to solve any problems even if the company shuts down and pulls out of White Pine. If the project goes full-scale, a \$7 million letter of credit kicks in.

The money would be used to pay for wastewater treatment. As the mine gradually fills with water, the company would keep pumps operating to keep water levels down. The pumped water would be treated and in theory keep water in the mine from finding other ways out.

Supporters are assuming there will be no additional leakage from the mine.

But Bressette says "there are geologic faults in there. And they are going to be using heavy explosives on a regular basis. You can't tell me that mixture won't be leaking out."

Then there's the problem of an ancient saltwater aquifer that was broken open by past mining efforts. Within 50 years, that salt water — seven times more salty than the ocean and too salty to sustain life — will fill up the mine and overflow.

Supporters of the solution

mining project say the planned wastewater treatment will help remove salt from the discharge.

The National Wildlife Federation is leading the charge to stop solution mining at White Pine, or at least require more money up front to cover future cleanup. They want a full-fledged environmental impact statement, saying potential ramifications go beyond Michigan's borders and cursory studies.

The federation says solution mining has been an economic dud and an environmental failure wherever it has been tried in the U.S. West.

The state of Arizona revoked the mining permit for the Van Dyke acid mine near Miami, Ariz., after groundwater was contaminated. At the Nacimient Mine near Cuba, N.M., the owners walked away during preliminary stages of acid mining, failing to make the system work and leaving a plume of acid contamination in nearby groundwater.

Michigan held a single public hearing in White Pine in March and awarded the permit two months later. The National Wildlife Federation now is considering action to force the feds to get involved, citing the EPA's own report as clear evidence federal rules apply.

"We aren't against mining in the region, but this isn't a responsible way to do it. It's just a stupid idea," said Noah Hall, an attorney for the conservation group's Great Lakes office. "The chances for long-term environmental disaster here far outweighs the tiny economic benefit the company might reap.

Even Michigan regulators, who say they have taken ample steps to protect the environment, concede in their report that if sulfuric acid solution does get out of the mine, it could kill most of the living organisms in the Mineral River and damage a 50-acre section of Lake Superior.

But the company says that's the worst case scenario, and that the acid almost certainly will stay inside the mine shafts. They also predict that any heavy metals will solidify and stay underground, too.

"Anything that would come out, if anything does, won't be acidic any more," said Robin Johnson, company spokesman. "The mine is like a giant Tums tablet, neutralizing the acid, with the limestone and calcium deposits down there."

Opponents, however, say the state and company have underestimated the potential damage, especially to the lake and fish spawning grounds.

Bresette's group, the Lake Superior Alliance, says any mishap would have a direct effect on Indian tribal rights to hunt, fish and gather guaranteed under treaties. He's trying to stop the trainloads of acid from rolling across any ceded territory.

"We're planning a protest from Wausau to White Pine, all along the railroad as it goes through Indian country, to say not now, not here, not ever," he said.

Jobs are scarce

Facing 18 percent unemployment, among the worst in the Midwest, the community around White Pine rallied support to approve the solution mining project during a state hearing in March.

Opponents of acid solution mining say the community is being misled into believing the project will create vast numbers of new jobs.

By using acid, the company hopes to cut production costs from about \$1 per pound of copper to about 60 cents. With copper now selling for about \$1 per pound, that new margin would be critical for the mine's profitability, especially against foreign competition.

"When the price of copper

Jobs vs. risk

Duluth

News-

Tribune

Tuesday

July 23

1996

starts dropping, you see the high cost producers, the marginal mines in the United States, shut down. But it doesn't affect the mines in Brazil or Southeast Asia, they just keep going," Johnson said. "This will be employment security to stop that cyclical cycle for us."

The company says that the actual process of solution mining will require only 200 workers. But they say if all goes well and the new, \$200 million smelter is constructed, eventually up to 500 people will be hired.

Opponents say employment likely won't increase much over the current level of about 220.

The project could have regional implications. If acid mining is allowed and proves financially successful, it could spread to other copper deposits in Northeastern Minnesota, across the U.P. and in northern Wisconsin.

The White Pine battle also has national implications, Hall said. A quirk in federal hazardous waste laws exempts mining waste from hazardous waste pollution regulations. The exemption was intended for inert materials like rock rubble. But Copper Range Co. says the exemption applies to heavy metals and acid they will leave in the mine shafts.

So far the EPA hasn't disagreed. Hall said other mining companies are eying the EPA's reaction.

"It would mean every other company, from service stations to Dow Chemical, are regulated for hazardous waste," Hall said. "But not the mining companies. Something doesn't stop being hazardous just because it's in a mine."

H₂SO₄

What is it?

Sulfuric acid is a colorless, dense, oily liquid that is extremely corrosive and is considered a hazardous material while being shipped. It is one of the strongest acids and is extremely caustic. It's widely used in manufacturing commercial fertilizer and in refining petroleum. It can mix with other chemicals to become a powerful detergent and can even be used in making medicines. Many minerals, including copper, dissolve in sulfuric acid and form sulfates. It is injected into the ground and then recovered on the surface in mining operations. It causes metals like copper to separate from other rock.

Source: World Book Encyclopedia

SUPPORT THE CEREMONIAL PROTEST

For Information on How to Support the Camp:
Call: (715) 274-6354.

Long-Term Support Coordinator is Mr.
Walt Bresette: (715) 779-5071.

The Bad River Tribal Government has not sanctioned the protest Camp. The Tribal Government is opposed to the acid transport and the acid 'mining' proposal. Please call and FAX the Bad River Tribal Chairman John Wilmar to support his and the Tribal Government's opposition. Urge them to do whatever they can to stop the proposal: (715) 682-7111; FAX: (715) 682-7118.