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Comments: I support federal buy-out of Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness school trust lands

The U.S. Forest Service and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) have reached a good agreement for a federal purchase of about 80,000 acres of state-owned school trust lands and 3,200 acres of county tax-forfeited land inside the 1.1-million-acre Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in the Superior National Forest in Minnesota.

This proposal will benefit the BWCAW, but some local state legislators are trying to torpedo the proposal. Your help is needed by September 17 to move the proposal ahead.

The issue goes back to Minnesota statehood in 1858, when the federal government granted two sections of land in every township (sections 16 and 36) to the State to support education. Elsewhere in Minnesota, these school trust lands were often sold, and the proceeds deposited in the state's Permanent School Fund that supports education. In other places, revenues from mineral exploration and mining permits, and timber sales on school trust lands also went into the Permanent School Fund.

But because of wilderness designation, the school trust lands inside the BWCAW have not generated income for the Permanent School Fund from logging or mining, and Minnesota's fiduciary responsibility to the Permanent School Fund has not been met. The school trust lands inside the BWCAW and the tax-forfeited St. Louis County lands do not have wilderness protections currently, and these lands inside the BWCAW could be developed in the future!

In 2012, and at the behest of local pro-development state legislators who had blocked earlier efforts for a federal purchase in order to acquire federal lands to develop, the Minnesota DNR proposed a land exchange with the Forest Service for Superior National Forest lands outside the BWCAW for some of the school trust lands inside the BWCAW. One of those state legislators vowed at the time that the state would "log and mine the hell out of those lands" once an exchange had occurred.

But an exchange of this magnitude proved to be enormously time-consuming and would have been prohibitively costly, and the DNR has now formally withdrawn its request for an exchange. Instead, the DNR and Forest Service now are proposing a federal purchase of these school trust lands within the BWCAW, using monies from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. A federal purchase will make administration of the BWCAW more efficient and provide far more money to the Permanent School Fund than would a land exchange, according to various analyses, including one by the local Timberjay newspaper. And this purchase proposal could finally resolve the lingering question of the BWCAW's school trust lands not providing any income for the Permanent School Fund.

But on August 15, a group of five local Republican state legislators wrote a letter to the DNR opposing the purchase, and instead pushing-again-for a land exchange. Among their claims is a wild one: that a purchase is illegal and would violate the 1964 Wilderness Act.

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