Budget proposal 2023

MINNESOTA POLLUTION CONTROL AGENCY

Find innovative solutions to protect our environment and support Minnesota mining

Funding research and grants for the taconite industry will help reduce the effects of hard-to-manage pollutants.

Challenge

While an essential component of Minnesota's economy, taconite mining has the potential to release high levels of pollutants like mercury, sulfate, and greenhouse gases into Minnesota's air, land, and water.

Mercury in taconite facility air emissions is deposited on land and water. Many Minnesota lakes and rivers have excess mercury and consumption advisories that warn anglers to limit the fish they eat due to mercury contamination — and fish in northeastern Minnesota have much higher mercury concentrations than fish in the rest of state. Taconite facilities can also release high-levels of sulfate into wetlands, lakes and streams, which has major impacts on the production of wild rice, a food critical to waterfowl and tribal nations. Directives from the federal government have put further emphasis on the taconite industry to meet sulfate limits for current and future facilities.

Installation of sulfate and mercury treatment technology can be expensive and more cost-effective alternatives must be explored. Addressing these challenges requires a public-private partnership to protect public health and the environment, and to support a thriving economy.

Proposal

Governor Walz is requesting a $20 million appropriation from the General Fund in FY2024 to support pollution reduction grants for taconite mining facilities and research through FY2027. Of this amount, $17.6 million will provide grants to taconite facilities that are required to reduce pollutants in either air emissions or discharges to surface waters. The grants would require a one-to-one funding match by participants.

The Natural Resources Research Institute at the University of Minnesota-Duluth will use $2.1 million of the appropriation for its research and testing of innovative technologies to reduce pollutant concentrations in water discharges. The research outcomes will benefit various facilities around the state, including taconite mines.

The Governor is also requesting an annual $300,000 appropriation from the General Fund for FY2024 and each subsequent year to fund two new FTEs and development of the new MPCA grant program.

Why it's important

Mercury is a neurotoxin that affects the nervous system of people, particularly young children. It can also cause kidney and liver damage. Eating contaminated fish is a primary way people are exposed to mercury. Sulfate is a pollutant that greatly impacts wild rice, a food source for people, waterfowl, and other aquatic life.

Working with researchers and industries to address mercury and sulfate pollution will help uncover new technologies and strategies to protect Minnesotans and our environment. The grants available to taconite facilities will both support tangible actions on pollutant reduction as well as a sustainable and thriving economy.

For more information

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