

For immediate release
Tuesday, October 28, 2003

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Mole Lake and Potawatomi Tribes Purchase Crandon Mine

Casino Gaming Monies Used to Protect Wolf River, Tourism Jobs & Culture

Declaring a victory for the environment and Northwoods tourism, two Indian tribes purchased the proposed Crandon mine today.

The Sokaogon Chippewa Community Mole Lake Band and the Forest County Potawatomi Community will divide ownership of the mining project land and the Mole Lake tribe will assume ownership of the mining applicant, Nicolet Minerals Company (NMC).

“With this purchase, we can prevent environmental threats from unsafe proposals to mine at the headwaters of the Wolf River,” Sandra Rachal, Mole Lake Chairwoman said. “The risks to the water, the land and the air from the proposed project were much too great.”

“This purchase protects the Wolf River, the wetlands and the groundwater of Northern Wisconsin,” Gus Frank, Chairman of the Forest County Potawatomi Community stated. “It ends the threat to the tourism economy – the economy that most of us in Northern Wisconsin, including the tribes, depend on. We all depend on the waters and natural resources of the Northwoods – for recreation, to bring tourists to our State, and, for the Tribes, to sustain our traditions. We’re proud to be a part of protecting this area for future generations.”

“The proposed mine would have created only a fraction of the jobs that tourism would have lost,” Chairman Frank continued. Chairman Frank noted that a statewide poll in July said that opening the mine could cost that area of Northern Wisconsin more than 23% of its in-state vacationers. “A 23% drop in tourism would cost 1,650 tourism jobs and \$65 million per year in lost revenues in the three counties surrounding the mine, devastating the area economy.”

Tina L. VanZile, Vice Chairwoman of Mole Lake said the tribe would withdraw the applications to mine at the site, saying, “NMC’s mining proposal is environmentally unsafe and technologically unsound.”

Kenneth VanZile, Councilman of the Mole Lake said the purchase protects lands of cultural, historic and religious importance. “The purchase will end the threat to Rice

Lake, where the Sokaogon Chippewa have taught their children to harvest manomin (wild rice) for many generations. The purchase includes Spirit Hill, where more than 500 Chippewa and Sioux were buried after a battle over the rice beds 200 years ago.”

“The mine site and surrounding area also includes lands, waters, plants and other resources needed for traditional cultural practices,” Chairwoman Rachal stated.

Northern Wisconsin Resources Group LLC (NWRG) sold its mining assets, including the mine project site, mineral rights and other lands, to the two tribes. The purchase includes 5,770 acres in Forest County, as well as 169 acres in Shawano and Oconto Counties, that will be divided between the two tribes.

Al Milham, Vice Chair of the Forest County Potawatomi Community said the purchase of the mine site will allow Forest County to focus on sustainable development. “The Northwoods can create jobs without threatening the natural resources that our tourism and our quality of life depend on. It’s time to focus on long-term and sustainable development.”

Chairman Frank said pristine areas, such as those at the mine site, are becoming increasingly scarce in Northern Wisconsin, limiting the ability of tribal members to conduct traditional practices. “We have lost so many resources, so many wild places, in just a few generations. This purchase protects some of the remaining resources, from the groundwater and wetlands to the waters of the Wolf River.”

“Protecting these lands has required a great personal sacrifice for tribal members. But it is a sacrifice that honors our ancestors and our children,” Thomas VanZile, Mole Lake tribal secretary said. “Our ancestors lived here. They fought and died to protect these lands for future generations. It is our responsibility to continue that tradition. For this reason, we have used our financial resources, including gaming revenues from our casinos, to protect this important Northwoods area. Without gaming revenues, we could not have purchased the mine site.”

Both tribes have vehemently opposed the mining proposals at the site for years. Under those proposals, the mine would affect water and increase sediment in Swamp Creek which flows into Rice Lake on the Mole Lake reservation, just west of the proposed mine site. The Potawatomi reservation is also nearby, to the northeast.

The tribes said the problems with the current mine proposal are numerous. For example, both the mine and a tailings dump would contain perpetually toxic wastes. The mine and the 16 million tons of wastes in the dump would be never-ending sources of groundwater contamination. In addition, the mine waste dump would eventually fail, potentially releasing massive amounts of additional contamination.

The proposed mine would also cause significant risks of surface and groundwater contamination because of its transportation, use, storage and disposal of hundreds of thousands of tons of hazardous substances, including cyanide. Similarly, the proposed mine would cause devastating flooding, dehydration and other impacts to hundreds of

acres of wetlands. Tens of thousands of tons of sediments would be dumped into now-pristine wetlands and streams.

The possibility of mining has created controversy since 1969, when Exxon began mineral exploration south of Crandon. An application to mine at the site was filed with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by Exxon in 1980 and withdrawn in 1986. The current proposal to mine zinc and copper at the site was filed in 1994 and substantially revised in 1998. However, the applicant had not yet submitted enough technical information for the application to be deemed complete and for the formal agency review of the permit to begin. Permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are also needed to mine.

Owners of the current project have included Crandon Mining Company, Rio Algom, Billiton and BHP Billiton. In April, Northern Wisconsin Resources Group acquired the official mine applicant, Nicolet Mineral Company (NMC), from BHP Billiton, the world's largest mining company. The Sokaogon Chippewa now own NMC.