

1 **4.2.11 Recreation and Visual Resources**

2 This section describes the recreational facilities and activities that typically take place in the  
3 NorthMet Project area, as well as the surrounding Arrowhead region. Because recreation in this  
4 region is strongly tied to the aesthetic condition of the landscape, this section also describes the  
5 visual setting of the NorthMet Project area and surrounding land.

6 **4.2.11.1 Mine Site**

7 **4.2.11.1.1 Recreational Facilities and Activities**

8 Surface rights to the Mine Site and adjoining federal lands are held by the USFS, and the Mine  
9 Site is part of the Superior National Forest. Management of the physical, biological, and social  
10 resources of the Superior National Forest are set forth in the Forest Plan. Intended to ensure that  
11 ecosystems are capable of a sustainable flow of beneficial goods and services, the plan includes  
12 guidelines and standards for almost 20 activities within the Superior National Forest including  
13 recreation and scenic, or visual, resources.

14 Recreation opportunities in the Superior National Forest are managed within the framework of  
15 the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). Using criteria that consider distance to roads,  
16 lakes, and trails, this system defines five classes that summarize recreation setting, opportunity,  
17 and experience. At one extreme, areas designated “primitive” have little evidence of people and  
18 are difficult to access. At the other extreme, “rural” areas are more accessible and provide  
19 developed facilities as well as opportunities to interact with other recreationists.

20 Most of the Mine Site is within the Semi-Primitive Motorized ROS with a small portion being  
21 Roaded Natural. This designation indicates areas where motor vehicles may be permitted and  
22 interactions between visitors are intended to be infrequent, but where human activity such as  
23 timber harvesting may be visible.

24 While this designation permits recreational activity, the Mine Site is entirely surrounded by  
25 private, restricted property, roads, and railroads. In particular, the Northshore Mine borders the  
26 Mine Site to the north, the restricted-access Plant Site borders the Mine Site to the west, and the  
27 Transportation and Utility Corridor isolates the Mine Site from adjacent portions of the Superior  
28 National Forest to the south. Some portions of the Mine Site are contiguous with Superior  
29 National Forest and state-owned public land, notably the eastern boundary of the Mine Site.  
30 However, these public lands are also encircled by restricted property, roads, and railroads. As a  
31 result, there is no public access to—and no practical opportunity to engage in recreational  
32 activity at—the Mine Site.

33 The region surrounding the Mine Site and adjoining federal lands is a popular and highly valued  
34 destination for recreation. Recreational activities that typically occur within 25 miles of the  
35 federal lands include (but are not limited to):

- 36 • Boating and camping in the BWCAW (approximately 20 miles north of the federal lands)  
37 and other local, state, and federal lands.
- 38 • Hunting, fishing (particularly in the Embarrass and Partridge Rivers), and hiking.

- 39 | • Year-round recreation, including downhill skiing at [the Giants Ridge Golf & Ski Resort](#)  
40 | (approximately 15 miles east of the Mine Site), cross-country skiing, snowmobiling,  
41 | mountain biking, hiking, and golf.
- 42 | • Biking, hiking, and roller-blading on the Mesabi Trail, which spans 70 miles across the Iron  
43 | Range.

44 | These activities typically do not occur in the immediate vicinity of the Mine Site, Plant Site, and  
45 | Transportation and Utility Corridor. For example, the nearest designated USFS campgrounds [are](#)  
46 | [Cadotte Lake 16 miles southeast, and Birch Lake 12 miles north. There are two back country](#)  
47 | [camping facilities](#) on Stone Lake and Big Lake, approximately 8 miles southeast of the Mine  
48 | Site. The nearest designated boat launch (Colby Lake) is within 5 miles, and the nearest  
49 | designated USFS trails (including the St. Louis River and Bird Lake Trails) are south and east of  
50 | Hoyt Lakes, more than 8 miles south of the Plant Site. The USDA Visitor Use report for the  
51 | Superior National Forest indicates that in 2006 there were 1.3 million national forest visits, with  
52 | roughly 57 percent of those visits being for recreational purposes. A national forest visit is  
53 | defined as “the entry of one person upon a national forest to participate in recreation activities for  
54 | an unspecified period of time” (USFS 2007b). It is important to note that visitation to any single  
55 | part of the Superior National Forest cannot be determined.

#### 56 | 4.2.11.1.2 Visual Resources

57 | The NorthMet Project area lies within, and adjacent to, the Superior National Forest in  
58 | northeastern Minnesota. The Superior National Forest provides over 3 million acres of rich and  
59 | varied resources (USFS 2007c). The visual character of the NorthMet Project area varies from  
60 | upland forests and wetlands to developed industrial areas. There are several active, closed, and  
61 | reclaimed mines near the NorthMet Project area, and evidence of past and ongoing mining (such  
62 | as reclaimed or abandoned waste rock piles) is present in many parts of the area surrounding the  
63 | Mine Site.

64 | The Mine Site and the adjoining federal lands are located along the south flank of the Mesabi  
65 | Iron Range, immediately south of the Giants Range formation (Figure 1-1). The Iron Range  
66 | supports numerous active mining operations, including the Northshore taconite mine located  
67 | north of the Mine Site. The Mine Site is relatively flat, with elevations between 1,570 ft and  
68 | 1,600 ft amsl. The Giants Range formation is the dominant landscape feature in the area. It rises  
69 | steeply to an average elevation of approximately 1,700 ft amsl (with some elevations above  
70 | 1,800 ft amsl) along the ridgeline (approximately 1 to 2 miles from the Mine Site), and declines  
71 | approximately 150 to 200 ft on its northern flank. The One Hundred Mile Swamp, Partridge  
72 | River, and the Northshore Mine are to the north between the Mine Site and the Giants Range.

73 | The Mine Site is surrounded by wetlands (including the One Hundred Mile Swamp) and mixed  
74 | deciduous and coniferous upland forests to the east, south, and west. The average canopy height  
75 | in the upland forest is 30 to 60 ft with occasional white pine and white spruce in excess of 70 ft.  
76 | In the wetland areas, the coniferous canopy is approximately 30 to 40 ft while the deciduous  
77 | growth is less than 20 ft tall. The Partridge River makes a horseshoe bend around the north, east,  
78 | and south sides of the Mine Site.

79 | The nearest potential visual receptors to the Mine Site—places where the public [may be](#) likely to  
80 | be able to see the Mine Site on a regular basis, such as homes or public roads with open views—  
81 | include the following [\(see Figure 4.2.11-1\). The ability to view the mine site is highly dependent](#)

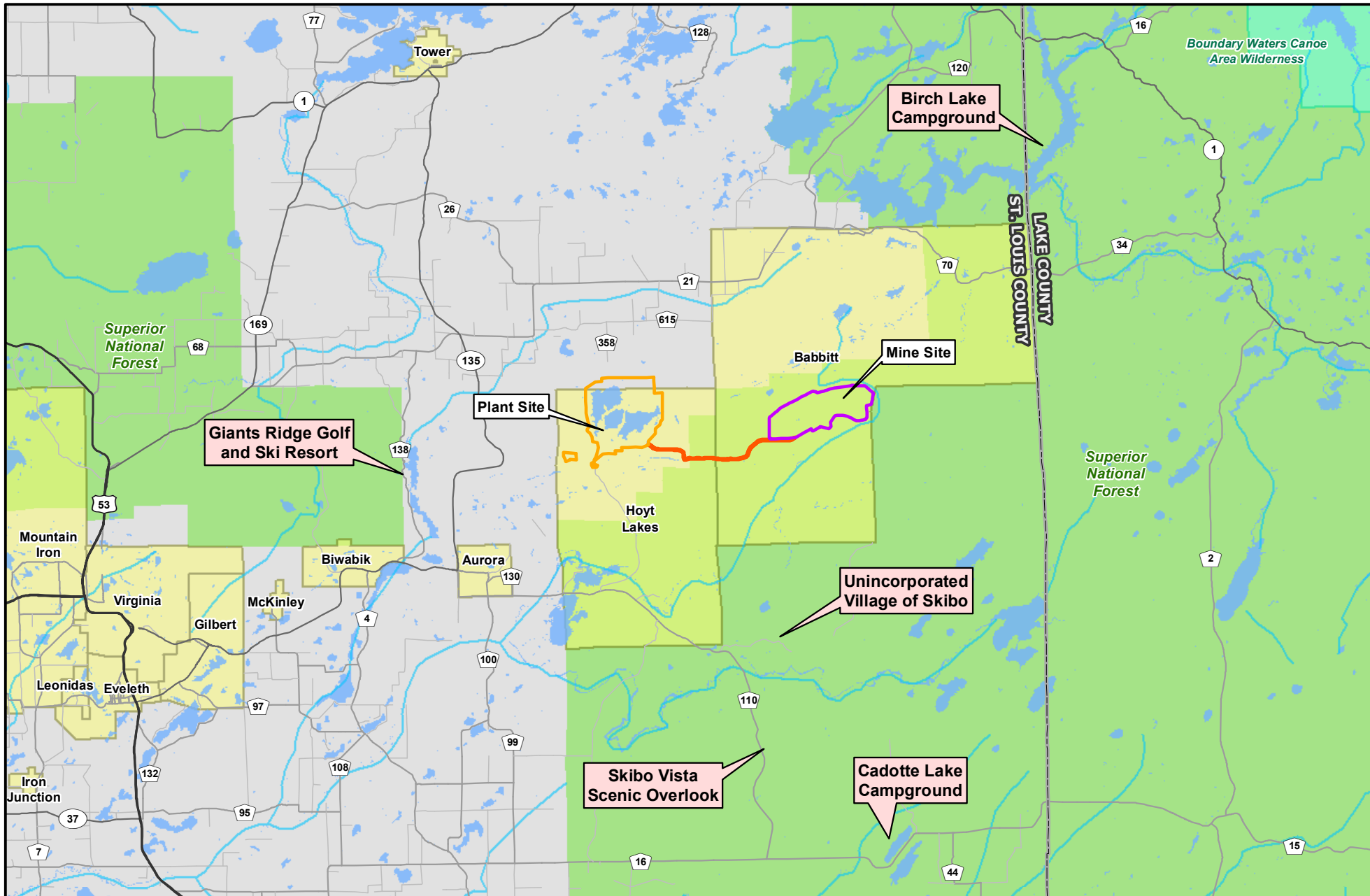
82 | on the topography and foliage present at a viewer's specific location, but views of the Mine Site  
83 | may be present at:

- 84 | • clusters of rural homes, approximately 7 miles to the south near the unincorporated village of  
85 | Skibo;
- 86 | • the City of Hoyt Lakes, approximately 9 miles to the southwest;
- 87 | • along Lake County Road 2 within the incorporated limits of the City of Babbitt,  
88 | approximately 12 miles to the east; and
- 89 | • the Skibo Vista Scenic Overlook, along Lake County Highway 15, approximately 12 miles  
90 | south (see Figure 4.2.11-2).

91 | The Mine Site may also be visible from Forest Road 112, which passes less than 2 miles from  
92 | the Mine Site; however, traffic on this road is likely to be low, given the absence of population  
93 | centers or significant recreational sites along the road.

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- Mine Site
- Plant Site
- Transportation and Utility Corridor
- Municipal Boundary
- Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness
- National Forest
- City/Town
- Streams/Rivers
- Lakes



This PSDEIS document is a Co-lead Agency provisional draft intended for internal review only. Corrections, revisions, and changes will be made prior to the release of the SDEIS for public review and comment.

**Figure 4.2.11-1**  
**Representative Visual Receptors**  
 NorthMet Mining Project and Land Exchange PSDEIS  
 Minnesota

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99 ***Figure 4.2.11-2 Mine Site and Plant Site, as Viewed from Skibo Vista Scenic Overlook***

100 The USFS uses the Scenery Management System to identify desired visual conditions, as  
101 expressed by the Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIOs). The SIO designations for Superior National  
102 Forest are defined in the Forest Plan. For purposes of this SDEIS, the following SIO definitions  
103 have been used to evaluate the visual resources of the non-federal lands (based on USFS 1995):

- 104 • Low SIO: The landscape appears moderately altered, and non-natural landscape features may  
105 begin to dominate.
- 106 • Moderate SIO: The landscape appears slightly altered. Non-natural features or activities may  
107 be apparent, but do not dominate.
- 108 • High SIO: The landscape appears unaltered, essentially in a “natural” state, with minimal  
109 evidence of non-natural features or activities.

110 The Mine Site and adjoining federal lands are designated by the USFS as areas of Low SIO.  
111 Within this designation, the landscape appears altered, and non-natural landscape features may  
112 begin to dominate. There are no major recreational trails within the Superior National Forest  
113 adjacent to the Mine Site that would expose recreational users to views of the mine on a regular  
114 basis.

115 Native American tribal members exercise rights to hunt, fish, and gather on Superior National  
116 Forest lands, including lands near the Mine Site. The frequency with which tribal members  
117 exercise these rights in portions of Superior National Forest with views of the Mine Site is not  
118 known; however, as described in Section 4.2.9 and 5.2.9, several cultural resources and locations  
119 adjacent to or potentially within sight of the Mine Site (as well as the Plant Site and  
120 Transportation and Utility Corridor), such as the Spring Lake Mine Sugarbush, Trygg Trail  
121 Corridor, and Mesabe Widjiw.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These sites are not depicted in the figures in this section due to sensitivity regarding cultural resources and locations.

123 **4.2.11.2 Transportation and Utility Corridor**

124 **4.2.11.2.1 Recreational Facilities and Activities**

125 The Transportation and Utility Corridor is within an area designated as Roded Natural. This  
126 designation indicates areas that are mostly natural in appearance (with some modification), and  
127 where evidence of other users and interactions between users are somewhat frequent. The  
128 Transportation and Utility Corridor is owned or leased by PolyMet, and is not open to the public.  
129 Entry points are gated and/or guarded, and crossing the corridor is prohibited. No recreational  
130 activity is permitted along the corridor.

131 **4.2.11.2.2 Visual Resources**

132 The Transportation and Utility Corridor follows Dunka Road between the Mine Site and the  
133 Plant Site and includes existing road and rail lines. Viewpoints for the corridor are the same as  
134 those for the Mine Site and Plant Site. The portions of Superior National Forest near the  
135 Transportation and Utility Corridor are within the Low SIO designation. As described in Section  
136 4.2.11.1, users of culturally important locations may have views of the Transportation and Utility  
137 Corridor.

138 **4.2.11.3 Plant Site**

139 **4.2.11.3.1 Recreational Facilities and Activities**

140 The Plant Site is located at the former LTVSMC processing plant. It is owned by PolyMet, and it  
141 is not open to the public. Entry roads are gated and/or guarded. No recreational activity is  
142 permitted at this site.

143 **4.2.11.3.2 Visual Resources**

144 Topography at the Plant Site rises from approximately 1,550 ft amsl near the railroad at the south  
145 end of the plant to approximately 1,780 ft amsl at the north end adjacent to the Tailings Basin  
146 (on the northern flank of the Giants Range). The inactive LTVSMC industrial processing  
147 buildings—including crushing, grinding, concentrating, and maintenance and pellet storage/rail  
148 loading facilities—dominate the visual landscape at the Plant Site, and have done so since their  
149 construction in the 1950s. The nearest potential visual receptors are residences approximately 3.5  
150 miles north of the Plant Site on County Road 358 and County Road 615. These rural residences  
151 are outside the incorporated limits of the cities of Babbitt and Hoyt Lakes. The City of Hoyt  
152 Lakes is the next closest visual receptor and is approximately 5 miles south of the Plant Site. The  
153 Tailings Basin and some buildings at the Plant Site are likely visible from the ski slopes at the  
154 Giants Ridge Golf and Ski Resort, approximately eight miles west-southwest of the Plant Site.

155 The existing LTVSMC Tailings Basin is located to the north of the buildings with legacy mine  
156 pits and waste rock stockpile sites to the south and east and a railroad to the west. Second Creek  
157 and its headwater wetlands also border the site immediately to the south. The Tailings Basin is  
158 surrounded by wetlands and low, forested (mixed coniferous and deciduous) uplands to the  
159 north, east, and west. The closest residences to the Tailings Basin are along Beckman Road and  
160 Salo Road, approximately 1.5 and 2.5 miles north of the Tailings Basin, respectively. Some of  
161 the culturally-important locations described above and in Section 4.2.9 are closer: the Sugarbush  
162 is approximately one-half mile from the Plant Site; the Mesabe Widjw intersects the Plant Site



163 and is less than two miles from the Mine Site; and portions of the Trygg Trail Corridor cross  
164 both the Mine Site and Plant Site. As described above for the Mine Site, users of these culturally-  
165 important locations may have views of the Plant Site.

166 Figure 4.2.11-1 shows the Plant Site in relation to the Mine Site, from the Skibo Vista Scenic  
167 Overlook, approximately 13 miles south of the Plant Site.

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