

Pete Stauber

Comment letter from Rep. Pete Stauber (MN-08)

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2308

September 22, 2025

Ms. Stephanie Handeland
Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
520 Lafayette Road
St. Paul, MN 55155

Ms. Handeland:

I write to express my serious concerns about the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's (MPCA) unattainable, unreasonable water quality state of 10 mg/L for wild rice. I am concerned with the serious negative consequences this standard will have on U.S. Steel's Keetac facility, along with the broader communities across the Iron Range and throughout the state of Minnesota, including the 725,000+ individuals I have the distinct honor of representing in the United States Congress and the thousands of proud union families that are supported by our state's great taconite mining industry.

The MPCA was directed to review and update the wild rice sulfate standard in 2011. Nearly a decade and a half later, the MPCA continues to flout state law by failing to properly review and update this standard. Instead, the agency is seeking to enforce a draconian standard that will serve as an existential threat to our way of life in Northern Minnesota. Such a standard will devastate the Iron Range, as well as the entire state of Minnesota, including the nearly one million students across the state that benefit from the robust funding that taconite mining provides for every single public school district in the state—both near and far from the Iron Range.

Rather than issue a standard that will serve as an existential threat to one of our state's greatest industries, the MPCA should utilize current science and site-specific needs to update the wild rice sulfate standard. The state's current 10 mg/L standard for sulfate runs completely counter to the best available science and is commercially unattainable for communities and industries alike—whether that be the state's taconite mining industry, our local governments, local water utilities, or countless small businesses across the state.

The state's current 10 mg/L standard for sulfate simply does not follow the science. In fact, many forms of commercial drinking water on the market have sulfate levels 40 times as high as the state's standard and wild rice has been proven to have grown successfully in waters with sulfate levels well over 100 times as high as the current standard. Additionally, neighboring states and Canada have not pursued such unreasonable sulfate standards as the state of Minnesota yet have not seen significant negative impacts on the safety and health of their wild rice.

Beyond the unscientific standard itself not being warranted, it is clear that commercially viable technologies to treat water to achieve such sulfate levels do not currently exist. Yet, the MPCA has proposed a compliance schedule that will be impossible for U.S. Steel and other taconite mining companies to execute upon. Additionally, time and time again, the MPCA has failed to work with U.S. Steel in good faith when evaluating site-specific standard requests or requests for reasonable variances for the company's operations, often denying these requests outright or claiming that such requests are out of compliance with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations, claims which have been categorically denied by the EPA.

Accordingly, I respectfully request the MPCA refrain from including sulfate limits in U.S. Steel's permits for their Keetac facility. Alternatively, at the very least, MPCA must consider compliance relief, including the issuance of reasonable variances and the development of reasonable compliance deadlines. Rather than seek to enforce such a draconian standard, it is much more prudent for the MPCA to begin following the 2011 state law and take the necessary steps to issue a science-based sulfate standard that does not harm one of our state's most important and most storied industries.

Should you have any questions or seek additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Shawn Rusterholz in my Washington, DC office at shawn.rusterholz@mail.house.gov / (202) 225-6211.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Pete Stauber", with a stylized, cursive script.

Pete Stauber
Member of Congress