

Ashley O'Neill

I am a Minnesotan who wants to ensure that our people and place are healthy for generations to come.

Wild rice (manoomin in Ojibwe and ps^o⁂K in Dakota) is a "superfood" that requires no pesticides or fertilizers to grow. Wild rice is a naturally fat-free and cholesterol-free food that is dense in protein and is a powerful antioxidant and lipid-lowering agent. It was a key component of Indigenous diets in our region before disruption of traditional foodways. But as the U.S. pushed tribes to reservations and replaced those traditional diets with commodity rations, it triggered health effects that persist even now. Today, Indigenous Minnesotans are disproportionately obese (Minnesota Department of Health: Adult Obesity), and are twice as likely as their neighbors to have diabetes (America's Health Rankings). I ask the MPCA to deny a variance from the 10 mg/L sulfate standard because uncultivated wild rice depends on clean water, and that manoomin or ps^o⁂K is critical to reestablishing the health and food sovereignty of these Minnesotans.

But wild rice is more than just a food on our table. It is a species that is central to biodiversity here in Minnesota. More than 17 species of wildlife listed in the MNDNR's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy as "species of greatest conservation need" use wild rice lakes as habitat for reproduction or foraging. But even non-threatened species benefit from healthy wild rice stands. Duck hunters rely on wild rice stands for cover, fishermen know that rice stands are a food source for amphibian and fish populations, and birders enjoy the variety of migrating waterfowl who feed at rice stands.

U.S. Steel complains that complying with the law will create substantial and widespread social impact. But the idea that mining creates jobs is a myth. Even in the Arrowhead, mining accounts for only 6% of employment^o just over 4,000 jobs (Minnesota Employment and Economic Development, Region 3: Northeast Minnesota 2024 Regional Profile). In contrast, leisure and hospitality^o industries that depend on clean water for fishing, wild rice stands for fowl habitat, and a steady flow of visitors who want to see the beauty of Minnesota^o account for 11.9% of jobs in the region (Minnesota Employment and Economic Development, Current Employment Statistics). And 100% of all 5.8 million Minnesotans need clean water to drink.

There is more than one way to feed our families. Extractive industries have just one job: to take a non-renewable resource and run. The social and economic impact of granting U.S. Steel's requested variance is real. It incentivizes pollution for profit at the expense of investment in sustainable economies. That's not what Minnesotans need or want. U.S. Steel has a responsibility to pay to clean up its own mess.

Because U.S. Steel did not provide written evidence that treatment costs would cause even a slowdown at Keetac, the MPCA should deny its baseless variance request. Please apply the 10 mg/L sulfate standard to the Keetac mine without variance because protecting wild rice protects us all.