

Shanai Matteson

My name is Shanai Matteson. I grew-up in northern Aitkin County, and I currently live and work in Itasca County.

My Grandpa Spolarich and his brothers all worked in the mines near Keewatin, and I grew-up with a few stories about how our way of life was hard and it was tied to this land. But my Grandpa didn't glorify it, and my Grandma still talks about living in a trailer house in Keewatin when my mom was little, worrying about their health because red dust would blow around like crazy and get stuck to everything.

My grandparents, my neighbors, my own kids and my feeling of responsibility are all reasons I'm making a comment on the draft Keetac permits that would require compliance with reasonable standards developed to protect water, wild rice, fish, and other aquatic life.

I support the draft permits - increased water monitoring and enforcement of the wild rice sulfate standard.

I am not a scientist, but I have worked as an environmental educator and advocate for many years and have collaborated on science communication with researchers and public agency scientists, so I understand enough about how sulfate pollution not only compromises wild rice, it can lead to increased levels of mercury, and that this poses health risks to those who consume fish here, which I have since I was a little girl, and which I still do and my daughter does too.

I attended the hearing on September 3rd in Virginia.

I heard talk about how U.S. Steel wants a variance from compliance with environmental protections meant to safeguard our common wealth and community health.

'It would cost too much to do it right,' they said, threatening to lay-off workers or leave the region if the regulatory environment wasn't favorable to their shareholders. They make huge profits off of ore from state mineral leases and local labor - as well as taxpayer funded infrastructure and clean up costs - somehow they seem to have convinced their workforce to pass the true costs onto our local communities.

There was a lot of talk at the hearing about Hay Lake, downstream of the Keetac tailings basin. Many in the room claimed that in Hay Lake wild rice was abundant, suggesting that current sulfide discharge was having no negative impact on the wild rice.

I accompanied a friend to Hay Lake a couple of days after the hearing, and what I saw really alarms me: The rice was not healthy, it was sparse and not the color I would expect, and many of the plants seemed to be stunted or broken.

I am including some pictures I took from a canoe, as well as pictures from a drone flight over Hay Lake.

We also decided to visit Sandy Lake Flowage - about 60 miles south of Hay Lake - in Aitkin

County on the very same day. The wild rice there appeared healthy and abundant, I am including some of those photos for comparison.

I believe Hay Lake and many other water bodies are already harmed by unchecked mining pollution in our region.

If we allow companies to continue dumping waste above legal limits, and skirting scientific standards, other mines will follow - including potentially new nickel and copper mines, including in Aitkin-Carlton and St. Louis-Lake Counties. The mess that is left for our kids and grandkids to deal with will only compound and grow.

The MPCA permits are not perfect. They don't include monitoring or protection for groundwater – and they only require mercury monitoring at discharge points, not in surface waters where we might see the impacts, but the permits (if enforced) are a start.

At a time when a lot of protections are being eroded at the federal level, we need strong and accountable state agencies. I hope Governor Walz is not going to encourage you to sacrifice our water and wild rice for political gains.

To be clear, I have nothing against miners or mining jobs, I just think the rhetoric that some jobs are worth a lot of harm / risk, obscures our responsibilities. I'm proud to be the granddaughter of an iron ore miner, but fewer protections for environmental and public health is not what my grandpa would've wanted for us, it will not make our region great – only caring for our places and communities, and truly making that one of our widely held values, can do that.

I hope regulators will respect science, sovereignty, and the rule of law – and stop permitting companies to pollute without monitoring or enforcing protections for our beloved places.









