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As a person who lives downstream from the Minntac tailings basin, I am interested in the results of this process as the decision may have ramifications for the future of the watershed where I fish and gather wild rice, but also on the economic well being of the communities on the Iron Range and beyond.

During the comment period the MPCA was asked to be brave. This was in the context of ignoring the law and granting the variance permit. The MPCA explained that the sulphate standard in wild rice waters is a uniquely Minnesota standard that the state has implemented. This has been upheld by the Minnesota courts and affirmed by the US EPA. To grant the variance would be arbitrary on the part of the MPCA and would therefore open the state up to a valid point of law for litigants. It is unfortunate that the MPCA will need to be brave when they are following the rules as set forth by the legislature, executive and courts.

In the economic analysis it would be beneficial for the MPCA to more clearly articulate the impacts of the mitigations. There were several comments that were related to the effects of the electricity needed to be successful with a reverse osmosis system. This system would also create a brine slurry that would need to be safely disposed of as well. Through this analysis the MPCA could articulate the number of jobs that would be created in the local area. It would seem that these jobs would be necessary to manage the tailings basins wastewater systems, electrical service needs, and also manage the reverse osmosis plant.

Further, there were mentions of other possibilities such as bacterial systems that can remove the sulphur from water sources. This was not fully analyzed as an alternative.

Lastly US Steel had offered some other modifications in design that may streamline removal and mitigations. This entailed going from four discharge points to one discharge point. This may be a viable cost savings opportunity. The MPCA and US Steel should work closely together to find reasonable solutions under the current regulatory framework.

The ultimate goal of these regulations is to ensure that wild rice waters remain viable into the future and provide the quality and quantity of rice we have historically relied upon. This may take creative solutions to ensure that we can be proud of both our environmental legacy and the economy our communities hold dear.