

Protecting Wild Rice from Sulfate Pollution

What is Minnesota Wild Rice (Manoomin)?

- Annual plant that grows in lake and stream sediments, bioindicator for clean water.
- Food and habitat for waterfowl, wildlife, and fish.
- High protein, sustainable food; Minnesota's state grain.
- Culturally and economically vital for Ojibwe and Lakota people, who have reserved rights to gather wild rice guaranteed by treaties.
- Despite loss to development, Minnesota still has more wild rice than any other state.

What are the Dangers of Sulfate Pollution?

- Science has confirmed that sulfate levels over 10 parts per million (mg/L) impair wild rice.
- Sulfate releases mercury from sediments and increases toxic methylmercury in the food chain and fish.
- One in 10 infants in Minnesota's Lake Superior region are born with unsafe mercury levels.
- Sulfate loading also releases nitrogen and phosphorus from sediments, resulting in algae blooms in once-clear lakes.



Glen Jackson, Sr. and Jr., harvesting wild rice. Photo by Dale Kakkak.

Sulfate Pollution Standard and Mining Threats

Why do Polluters Oppose Sulfate Controls?

- Taconite mines and coal plants are the largest dischargers of sulfate today in Minnesota.
- Copper-nickel sulfide ore mining would discharge massive quantities of sulfate.
- Minnesota adopted a federally-approved 10 mg/L wild rice sulfate standard in 1973.
- For decades, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) refused to enforce the wild rice standard.
- In 2010, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) told MPCA it must enforce Minnesota's sulfate rule.



Acid mine drainage from sulfide mining.

WaterLegacy's Work in Alliance with Tribes to Protect Wild Rice

Wild Rice Sulfate Standard

- **2012** When mining polluters sued to block enforcement of the wild rice sulfate standard, WaterLegacy intervened and **won in district court and the appeals court.**
- **2018** WaterLegacy organized, submitted expert reports, and testified in alliance with Tribes. We won a huge victory and the **Administrative Law Judge disapproved MPCA's repeal plan and upheld the wild rice sulfate standard.**
- **2018** WaterLegacy and our allies won another important victory when **Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed bills to repeal the wild rice sulfate standard.** MPCA withdrew its opposition to the sulfate standard.
- **2021** WaterLegacy and the Fond du Lac Band received final rulings from our 2019 appeals of MPCA's weak permit for Minntac tailings basin sulfate pollution. The **courts upheld control of sulfate in groundwater and control of sulfate in surface water** under the Clean Water Act.



Wild Rice Impaired Waters

- Listing waters as “impaired” is necessary to prevent more pollution and restore them.
- Since 2012, WaterLegacy has worked with Tribes to demand that MPCA list wild rice waters impaired due to sulfate.
- This effort geared up in 2020, with Tribal consultation and WaterLegacy advocacy.
- **In 2021, for the first time ever, the EPA overruled MPCA and listed 33 wild rice impaired waters.**
- We are seeking more listings and protection.

Join Our Work to Protect Wild Rice

- **Sign up** at waterlegacy.org to learn about upcoming events and opportunities to protect wild rice.
- **Follow** WaterLegacy on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.
- **Visit us** at waterlegacy.org and learn more about wild rice and sulfide mining threats.
- **Let us know** about threats to wild rice in your community or ways in which we can partner with you and your neighbors to protect clean water, wild rice, health, and tribal reserved rights.



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