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Local View: Hay Lake should be healthy; Keetac drainage a problem

From the column: "Minnesota's sulfate limit should be enforced to reduce sulfate in Hay Lake, not weakened."



Mike Maleska

Opinion by Mike Maleska

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The [News Tribune wrote](#) on Jan. 16 that the U.S. Steel Keetac plant exceeded Minnesota's sulfate limits on wastewater nearly 300 times. After reading the story, I listened to the court recording in which company lawyers said they wanted a weaker rule so Keetac could continue draining more sulfate into Hay Lake.

Bad idea.

Hay Lake is a water body I've known well for 60 years. I remember when it had a clear weed line. The lake is now so loaded with sediment that the weeds sometimes cover all but a small trench near the north end. It was once a great fishing lake with crappie, walleye, northern pike, and panfish. I once caught a 2-pound northern with a large dogfish tail sticking out of its mouth. As kids, a good friend of mine and I hunted, roamed, fished, and explored all over this area.

I remember the water entering Hay Lake was clear. There was a beautiful long sandbar and behind that sandbar was where the wild rice beds began, spreading around the west and south sides of the lake and continuing down Hay Creek.

For decades now, though, the water has come to appear tan with a hint of greyish green; it is definitely not clear.

By all rights, Hay Lake should be a healthy lake. The water is charged with productive springs along the east shoreline where a steep balsam bluff abuts the lake. Due to these springs, most winters the ice on that shoreline can't be trusted if you're on foot. Even on snowshoes or cross-country skis, it's wise to find a different route to find solid ice.

So, what changed? The water coming down the creek to Hay Lake drains what we call around here the "Keetac diversion ditch." As the Keetac tailings basin expanded, it blocked St. Louis County Highway 16 and part of County Line 16. All that property in both Itasca and St. Louis counties was then flooded by the mining company to make a larger Keetac tailings basin. I know this area because for years I worked for a local logger, cutting and skidding aspen over there. It seems to me Keetac and its tailings-basin drainage changed Hay Lake.

Minnesota's sulfate limit should be enforced to reduce sulfate in Hay Lake, not weakened. Maybe then our kids and grandkids will be able to enjoy the water, fishing, and hunting that I once took for granted.

Mike Maleska of Hibbing retired after working as a taconite miner for 42 years. He's a former union president, Marine Corps veteran, angler, and hunter who's active in grassroots politics and who recently joined the nonprofit [WaterLegacy](#) as a board volunteer. He wrote this for the News Tribune.