

▲ Support the Timberjay by making a donation. (/supportus/)

Welcome! Log in



(/)

Serving Northern St. Louis County, Minnesota

Sulfate regulations

MPCA shouldn't let politics loosen rules that keep our waters safe for wild rice

Posted Thursday, May 8, 2025 9:08 am

There is justified public skepticism over the specifics and the timing of a proposal by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to create what is known as a multi-discharger variance, or MDV, in order to streamline the process for exempting companies from the state's sulfate limit for wild rice waters.

Sulfate discharges are a major issue in Minnesota, which has the strictest sulfate limits in the nation, limits that were enacted in the 1970s in order to protect wild rice.

The MPCA has a checkered history when it comes to enforcing this pollution standard and only began to do so after tribal nations began pressuring state regulators about 15 years ago to enforce its own rules. Users of wild rice, both tribal and non-tribal, had become increasingly concerned about the apparent decline in the extent and abundance of wild rice in the state and understandably wanted every step that could possibly be taken to stem the decline. Wild rice, or manoomin, is an exceptional food, tasty and highly nutritious, that can be easily stored for years once processed. For the Ojibwe people, it has long been a mainstay and is foundational to their culture.

Sulfate isn't the only threat to wild rice, of course. Climate change is probably an even greater threat in the longer term. But addressing sulfate discharges is a step that Minnesota can take on its own to help protect this unique resource.

Addressing the problem by making it easier to obtain a variance isn't an auspicious start. A variance is, in effect, a permit that allows a discharger to exceed a pollution standard.

Typically, variances are granted to single dischargers, and only in cases where current technology can't control the discharge or doing so would not be economically viable. An MDV would make it much easier to grant variances to a large number of dischargers.

There are certainly some instances where such a variance is justified, but MPCA officials were cagey in a web presentation last week when asked whether the MDV process might encompass the state's taconite industry, which has been discharging high levels of sulfate into wild rice waters for decades. The industry would undoubtedly argue that it is not economically feasible to address its sulfate problem because the only fully proven technology – reverse osmosis – would be far too costly at the scale that would be necessary. As we have previously reported, it appears there are cost-effective methods to substantially reduce sulfate levels in water that have been developed in our region, but the taconite industry appears loath to pursue such alternatives. They may be banking on a variance instead.

There is much at stake on this issue. Unlike some parts of the state, where water is naturally higher in sulfate (and wild rice is largely absent), waters in northeastern Minnesota that are unimpacted by mining are exceptionally low in sulfate, typically no more than 1-2 mg/l, which is one reason that wild rice thrives in our region's waters. But high sulfate discharges (exceeding 1,000 mg/l in some cases) from taconite operations, such as U.S. Steel's Minntac plant, appear to have impacted downstream wild rice lakes. Those discharges may also be contributing to increased methylation of mercury in downstream waters, such as Lake Vermilion, where sulfate levels in Pike Bay are as much as five times higher than background levels due to inflow of mining discharge from the Pike River. That discharge of sulfate from the Minntac tailings basin has been traced through water testing all the way to Crane Lake. To date, the state of Minnesota has mostly dragged its feet when it comes to cleaning up the Minntac facility. If not for pressure from tribes, with backing from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, it's likely the MPCA would have taken its cues from the Legislature – and done nothing to address the issue.

Unfortunately, that pressure from federal regulators is now all but vanished, as the Trump administration is undertaking a virtual dismantlement of the EPA. That makes the timing of the MPCA's push to develop a blanket variance process particularly troubling.

If the MPCA is planning to use this variance process to address its ongoing regulatory headache over the mining industry, the only pushback is likely to come from the public, including tribes, wild rice users, anglers concerned about mercury, and environmentalists. There will be opportunities for public comment on this proposal and residents of the North Country who care about clean water should be paying attention and speaking out.

The political influence of the mining industry in our region can seem overpowering at times, but sustained public pressure can make a difference. Without it, nothing will change.

OTHER ITEMS THAT MAY INTEREST YOU

[The plastic within us \(/stories/the-plastic-within-us,22964\)](#)

[Windigo ways \(/stories/windigo-ways,22929\)](#)

Reaping what we've sown (/stories/reaping-what-weve-sown,22901)

A purpose to the chaos (/stories/a-purpose-to-the-chaos,22882)



ADVANCED SEARCH (/SEARCH.HTML)



(<https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?>

oaparams=2__bannerid=36__zoneid=9__cb=28ad615fa7__oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.janischrealty.com)

THIS WEEK'S E-EDITION



Inside:
Dancing with the Stars... See /12
Spring sports... See /1B
Fishing opener preview... See /1B

the TIMBERJAY

Serving the communities of northern St. Louis County since 1989

VOL. 36, ISSUE 18

May 9, 2025

\$1.00

VOYAGEURS NATIONAL PARK

Park service drops unpopular frozen lake use plan



by DAVID COLEMAN

Guest Column

VOYAGEURS NATIONAL PARK officials have scrapped a controversial plan that would have restricted winter vehicle access on the park's frozen lakes, ending a two-year process that

Left: Rules that would have sharply constrained some kinds of travel on frozen lake surfaces in Voyageurs have been withdrawn.

drew sharp criticism from local residents, business owners, and state officials.

The decision, formally announced Tuesday, came with the termination of an environmental assessment tied to the Frozen Lake Surface Use Plan. According to a press release, the proposal was no longer necessary after staff concluded that winter vehicle use posed no greater environmental risk than summer motorboat activity. That finding

made further federal review under the National Environmental Policy Act unnecessary.

The plan, first introduced in 2023 and revised in 2024, aimed to bring the park into compliance with federal regulations that restrict off-road vehicle use. But it would have significantly changed how people access Kabetogama and Lake Kabetogama in the winter, limiting tracks, ATVs, and UTVs to plowed roads, and requiring snowmobiles or non-motorized

transport for anything beyond. An access fee was also floated as part of the original proposal, raising additional concerns among locals.

Community response to the plan was overwhelmingly critical. At packed town halls at Kabetogama and International Falls, as well as in virtual forums, attendees questioned why a plan was needed at all for practices that had worked for decades. Park

See...FROZEN pg. 11



CITY OF ELY

\$550,000 donation to Ely Fire Dept.

Donation made from Louis Gormick Trust

by CATE CLARK

Staff Writer

ELY—The Louis Gormick Trust made a \$550,000 donation to the Ely Fire Department on Tuesday at the Ely City Council meeting.

Bernie Pichler, trustee, gave a short presentation on Gormick, who passed away on August 27, 2024, and his service to the fire department.

Gormick was born and raised in Ely. He attended Ely Memorial High School and Vermilion Community College. He served in the U.S. Navy in WWII and the Korean War. After his military service, he became the business manager for the Ely

Public Schools for 37 years. Gormick was a civic-minded citizen and served his community as a member of the Ely Kiwanis Club and the Ely Fire Department. He was a member of the

of the American Legion No. 248, VFW Post No. 2717, and St. Anthony's Catholic Church. Gormick was still a minor when he served his first stint with the Ely Fire Department, where Ely's teenagers helped to fight fires while older

Louis Gormick

See...DONATION pg. 9

(/stories/may-9-2025-e-edition,22986)

WATER SAFETY

Mission: Reduce drowning risks

Community effort providing life preservers at area beaches

by JESS SUMMIT

Town-Southern Editor

REGIONAL—Drowning is the leading cause of injury-related death among children ages one to four. And for two-area emergency service providers and their families, this is more than a statistic. Childhood family tragedies pushed both Rebekah Litter and Dena Sukhonenko into training

as emergency responders, but it also served as the impetus to try to make such tragedies less common for area families.

This week, ambulance and campground volunteers, coordinated by Litter and Sukhonenko, finished installing free life preserver lending kiosks at public beaches in Hibbing, Tower-Soudan, and Ely. Each kiosk stocks life preservers in

sizes from infant to large adult, and are available to use and return, free-of-charge, for anyone needing one. The project was an outgrowth of other safety education programs that Litter has been working on, and she recruited Sukhonenko, as well as Dena Moniz from the Ely Ambulance Service, to help

See...KIOSKS pg. 10

Above: Dena Sukhonenko and her husband Tom get help from Hoodoo Point Campground Manager Randy Pratt in unloading the new life jacket kiosk installed near the campground beach this week.

photo by J. Summit

ST. LOUIS COUNTY JAILS

Built for misfits, now a misfit itself

A closer look at how mental illness is reshaping life at the county jail

by DAVID COLEMAN

Guest Column

Editor's Note: This is a second part in a series on the St. Louis County jails.

REGIONAL—The officer approached the cell door with

a lunch tray in hand. "John, time to eat."

Inside, the inmate was twitching with nervous energy, sleepless now for two days. He stood motionless for a beat, then turned slowly toward the officer, eyes wide and wild.

"You think I'm stupid?" he boomed. "You think I don't see the camera in the sand?"

"It's just food, man," the officer replied calmly. "Some tray everyone else gets."

John laughed, a sudden, sharp bark. Then, without

warning, he kicked the door with full force. The clang echoed across the pod.

"Back off!" he shouted. "Back off or I'll bash my head in and make you watch!"

The officer stepped back. See...JAIL pg. 9

WATER QUALITY

MPCA seeks to ease exemptions from sulfate discharge rule

by MINNEAPOLIS HERALD

Staffing Editor

REGIONAL—Officials with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency are facing skepticism over a proposal to make it easier

to issue companies variances for sulfate discharges, which are known to negatively impact wild rice.

The state has the nation's wild rice, a native plant that grows in the wetlands of the state. It was protected in the 1970s to protect the nutritious wild grain, which grows more abundantly in Minnesota than anywhere else in the world.

But the standard was never enforced until the past decade, when the agency came under pressure from tribes and the federal Environmental Protection Agency to do so.

"The MPCA is committed to enforcing the 10 milligram per liter standard," said Paul Postans, one of several MPCA officials who spoke during a webinar last week on the agency's plan to use a "multiple discharge" rule to more easily allow companies to exceed that standard. About

See...SULFATE pg. 10



Home to the Piragis Bookstore
Where great books always find you!
OPEN DAILY – CANOE RENTALS, GUIDES, PERMITS
CANOE, KAYAKS, CAMPING, GEAR, KNIVES, GIFTS
piragis.com 218-365-6745 boundarywaterscatalog.com

Contact The Timberjay

218-753-2950
editor@timberjay.com



May 9, 2025 e-edition (/stories/may-9-2025-e-edition,22986)

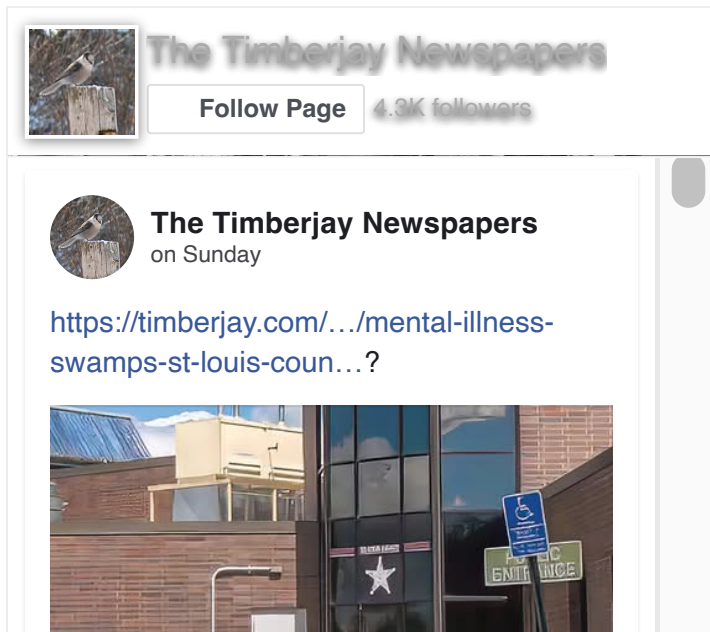
Click here (/stories/may-9-2025-e-edition,22986)



(<https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?>

[oaparams=2_bannerid=70_zoneid=9_cb=119f40a96d_oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.advoptical.com%2F](https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?oaparams=2_bannerid=70_zoneid=9_cb=119f40a96d_oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.advoptical.com%2F))

FIND US ON FACEBOOK





([https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?](https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?oaparams=2__bannerid=48__zoneid=9__cb=5a78ab0cee__oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.vermilionland.com%2F)

[oaparams=2__bannerid=48__zoneid=9__cb=5a78ab0cee__oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.vermilionland.com%2F](https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?oaparams=2__bannerid=48__zoneid=9__cb=5a78ab0cee__oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.vermilionland.com%2F))



([https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?](https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?oaparams=2__bannerid=121__zoneid=9__cb=95b6e46064__oadest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.lundgrenford.com%2F)

[oaparams=2__bannerid=121__zoneid=9__cb=95b6e46064__oadest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.lundgrenford.com%2F](https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?oaparams=2__bannerid=121__zoneid=9__cb=95b6e46064__oadest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.lundgrenford.com%2F))

VIDEO

A bird in the hand ... timberjays feeding (/stories/a-bird-in-the-hand-timber-jays-feeding,16951)

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2020

0:00

[More Videos ▶ \(/videos/\)](#)

MINNESOTA STATE NEWS

**North Shore resort owner
plans Mille Lacs Lake retreat**

**Cook commits to library
repairs with or without
FEMA**

**Staffing costs push some
Minnesota hospitals to the
financial brink**



(<https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?>

[oaparams=2__bannerid=119__zoneid=9__cb=ce3b76f124__oadest=https%3A%2F%2Fnorthstarcreditunion.org%2F](https://timberjayads.creativecirclemedia.com/www/delivery/ck.php?oaparams=2__bannerid=119__zoneid=9__cb=ce3b76f124__oadest=https%3A%2F%2Fnorthstarcreditunion.org%2F))