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Debate over protecting Minnesota's wild rice from sulfate pollution intensifies on Iron Range



A stalk of developing wild rice stands in Big Rice Lake, a 3,000 acre lake south of Remer, Minn.

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Outside of northeast Minnesota's Iron Range, it's likely not many people know much about the state's relatively obscure, more than half-century old [pollution](#)

[standard](#) that limits how much sulfate can be released into lakes and rivers where wild rice grows.

But in the city of Virginia last week, the divisive issue drew a standing room only crowd of about 500 people to a spirited public meeting where, for several hours, the standard was alternately explained, defended and vilified.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has issued [two draft wastewater permits](#) for U.S. Steel's Keewatin Taconite mine, known as the Keetac mine. The permits would, for the first time, enforce the state's strict limit on sulfate discharges into nearby waterways.

Mineworkers and their supporters warn if the permits are adopted, Keetac and eventually other mines could be forced to shut down, threatening the backbone of the region's economy. But others from around the region, including tribal members and environmental groups, say it's long past time to enforce the standard and protect wild rice, which is Minnesota's state grain and a culturally significant food for Ojibwe people.



Hundreds of people packed a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency public meeting in Virginia to weigh in on proposed permits for the Keetac mine that for the first time enforce a sulfate pollution standard established in 1973.

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Both viewpoints were on full display at the public meeting.

“Unfortunately, this is anti-mining. That’s what it is,” said Kraig Raiber, who’s been working at Keetac for 26 years, and was one of dozens of people who lined up to address MPCA officials.

The mining industry has long argued the standard is flawed, and meeting it would be cost-prohibitive. U.S. Steel has said it would cost more than \$800 million to install and operate the water treatment technology needed to remove much of the sulfate and meet the standard.

That would raise costs and make the mine less competitive in a global marketplace, said Cliff Tobey, benefits coordinator at Keetac and Minntac, another nearby mine on the Iron Range owned by U.S. Steel.



United Steelworkers union officials Steve Bonach and Cliff Tobey at a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency public meeting in Virginia.

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“An increase of \$17.50 per ton might sound small. But when the market price hovers around \$100 a ton, that’s a major hit. It’s the kind of cost that could spell the end for KeeTac and possibly other mines,” Tobey said.

That would be devastating to a region that's heavily reliant on high-paying mining positions and jobs in related industries, several people told MPCA officials.

"If you lived in this area in the '80s, you would not believe the hardships everybody went through," said Steve Bonach, president of the Steelworkers union local at Minntac, recalling an earlier industry downturn.

"I'm having visions of this happening again. I know exactly what would happen if these mines went down. This place would be a disaster."

But others at the hearing thanked state officials for moving to enforce the wild rice sulfate standard.



Ricky Defoe, a member of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, testifies in favor of mining permits that limit sulfate pollution at a meeting in Virginia.

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"This standard is based on decades of solid science and exists to protect wild rice," said Leanna Goose, a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. "Wild

rice is not just food. It is a treaty protected food. And that protection must be honored.”

“Clean water that wild rice can flourish in is not worth risking,” added Lisa Abazs of Finland, Minn., who told the MPCA she and her husband had just harvested a year’s worth of the grain.

“The corporation can afford to clean its effluent. The cost of not doing that will fall on the land and on all of us who continue to live on the land when the company is gone.”

Sulfate saga

The MPCA’s move to add sulfate limits to Keetac’s permits is the latest step in a [long back-and-forth saga](#) over efforts to enforce the standard, which was adopted in 1973 after research found that wild rice didn’t grow well in waters high in sulfate.

In 2011, following a lawsuit filed by the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce to eliminate the standard, and amid pressure from environmental groups and Indian tribes to start enforcing it, the state legislature asked the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to study the rule and see if it needed updating.

Six years later, the agency proposed a complex, flexible formula that would determine what standard would be appropriate for each specific lake or stream, based on sulfate, iron content, organic carbon and other factors. But a state administrative law judge rejected the proposal.



Paula Maccabee, executive director and counsel for the group WaterLegacy, speaks in favor of enforcing the state's sulfate wild rice standard at a public meeting in Virginia.

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More recently, in 2022, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency told the MPCA it needed to enforce the original standard as required by the Clean Water Act. That's what led to the proposed permits for Keetac.

"I think this is a milestone, that the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is going to act consistent with the science and the law," said Paula Maccabee with the environmental group WaterLegacy, which has pushed for enforcement of the sulfate standard for the past 15 years.

Maccabee doesn't dispute that treating sulfate is expensive. But she argues U.S. Steel can afford it. The company was recently purchased by Japan-based Nippon Steel, which as part of the acquisition agreed to pump \$11 billion into upgrading U.S. Steel facilities.

"So from our perspective, there's an opportunity to have a real, major win for Minnesota. Japanese investors build new infrastructure and hire workers to build it and operate it. We get cleaner water. We get healthier wild rice."

But mining supporters question why U.S. Steel would make that investment if it would significantly raise the prices of the taconite pellets they produce.

“If we get hit with this kind of price increase, I’m worried they’ll shut our mines down,” said John Arbogast, District 11 staff representative for the United Steelworkers union, which represents mine workers.



John Arbogast, District 11 staff representative for the United Steelworkers union, speaks against proposed permits for the Keetac mine that limit sulfate discharges at a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency meeting in Virginia.

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“You look at Keetac, they’re the most cost-effective mine in North America. Well, that advantage could be erased instantly by this standard.”

Arbogast added that there are many factors that contribute to the health of wild rice, from water levels to severe storms to the unique characteristics in different water bodies. He and others aren’t convinced that reducing sulfate levels will help wild rice.

“So that’s why it’s so controversial for us,” he said.

MPCA officials told the crowd on the Iron Range that sulfate, even at low levels, has been found to damage wild rice.

As part of its analysis of U.S. Steel's request for a variance to the permits, in which the company asked for a more lenient application of the sulfate standard, the agency said the company showed sufficient cash flow to afford the treatment.

"U.S. Steel did not provide written evidence that the treatment cost would cause a slowdown or a shutdown at Keetac," said Theresa Haugen, industrial water and mining section manager at the MPCA. "It's open to public comment, so we could receive more or different information, but based on what we have, this is the analysis."

The agency is taking [public comments on the draft permits](#) through Sept. 22.



Republican State Rep. Spencer Igo of Wabana Township, who represents the district that includes the Keetac mine, speaks against proposed wastewater permits at a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency public meeting in Virginia, Minn., on Sept. 3, 2025.

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Spencer Igo, a Republican state representative whose district includes the Keetac mine, asked MPCA staff to take a picture of the crowded room of people at the public meeting on the Iron Range.

“Remember what you’re doing to our communities,” Igo said. “Because at times like these, this is when the Range comes together. This is when we stand up and we say, ‘No, you got it wrong. We’re going to get it right and we’re going to fix this.’”

But Nancy Schuldt, water projects coordinator for the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, said the Band appreciates the MPCA’s efforts to enforce the standard.

“We absolutely need the state to step up and do that so that we can protect what remains here in Minnesota, which is really the last place in the United States where substantial populations of naturally growing wild rice are still here,” Schuldt said. “And we need to do everything we can to protect that.”

- [Debate over protecting Minnesota’s wild rice from sulfate pollution intensifies on Iron Range](#)
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