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OPINION COLUMNS

## Local View: Walz can still make right call to protect wild rice

From the column: "Like most people in the taconite industry, I was unaware while employed of the taconite tailings pollution issue or its enormity. It's fair to say many remain unaware."



This wild rice is growing in Wisconsin. Karel Bock/Getty Images

**By Mike Maleska**

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 Opinion

I'm not one to assign hero status to regular people who make critical decisions. But the chief federal judge for the District of Minnesota, the late Miles Lord, was one of those people.

Now it is Gov. Tim Walz's turn. Minnesota needs him and other state leaders to uphold the sulfate standard for wild rice waters to

10 milligrams per liter.

I am 72. I retired from United Taconite in 2019 after 42 years. I also served as president of the United Steelworkers local union three of those years. Like Walz, I am a veteran.

My two colleagues who contributed to this column are Chris Baldwin, a retired mining engineer with vast experience, and his son Andy Baldwin, an educator with master's degrees in biology and secondary education. We are who Walz has been waiting for to help him make a correct decision on an issue that has been troubling him for some time.

The threat is to public health. That threat comes from sulfate pollution that causes mercury methylation. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency says you can only eat one fish a month, but the 1855 Treaty says Native families can eat all the fish they want.

We are now whistleblowers.

I represented more than 600 mining families in contract negotiations with what I believed was a responsible company. My union negotiated health care and other contract issues for employees and retirees. Chris saw to it that the safest working conditions possible were in place at North American worksites underground in uranium and salt mines and in open-pit sulfide-ore gold and taconite mines.

We now have discovered that these Northeastern Minnesota taconite mining companies released, for several decades, extremely high levels of sulfate and mercury that polluted the very places workers live. With few exceptions, these companies performed their duty of providing the MPCA with monthly water samples, and they did so for over 50 years. And the MPCA then sat on it.

Why did I wait until I retired to become a water activist?

Like most people in the taconite industry, I was unaware while employed of the taconite tailings pollution issue or its enormity. It's fair to say many remain unaware. Upon retiring, I heard about the problem and didn't believe it. So, I tracked down a chemist who led a volunteer group that did water sampling in the Babbitt area. I was trained to sample, and now my initials are on some of the samples in the MPCA database.

The same passion I had for the company I worked for and the people I represented now inspires me to correct a terrible legacy of extortion and exploitation of public air and waters in our Northland.

The Minnesota Department of Health fish-consumption advisory has published new recommendations that are very disturbing, revealing dangerous levels of methylmercury in gamefish. I feel responsible, regretful, and resentful for having participated in this industry that covered up shamefully destructive practices that not only endangered workers but also their families, Iron Range communities, and the tourism industry.

Here is our position:

One, regulate taconite sulfate discharge now and enforce the sulfate standard at Keetac.

Two, Minnesota must clean up taconite-tailings reservoirs and waste-rock piles and do so properly before permitting copper-nickel mining that may be far more toxic.

Three, Gov. Walz needs to leave a positive legacy for people who love Minnesota's outdoors (fishing, hunting, ricing) and for the subsistence rights that our indigenous neighbors were promised and on which they rely.

And four, reintroduce the MPCA's citizen board of eight members.

**Mike Maleska of Hibbing retired after working as a taconite miner for 42 years. He's a former union president, Marine Corps veteran, angler, hunter, and board volunteer for the nonprofit [WaterLegacy\(https://waterlegacy.org/\)](https://waterlegacy.org/) . He wrote this for the News Tribune, with Chris Baldwin and Andy Baldwin of Hibbing as contributors.**