

# Wild Rice Protection

By Sue Leaf

## H.F. 3280

Wild Rice water findings established and listing authorized, and applications of water quality standing nullified and restricted. Authored by Lueck, Fabian, Heintzmann, Swedzinski, Layman and others. (S.F.2983 Eichorn, Tomassoni, Ingebrigtsen, Utke, Gazelka is the



companion bill.)

Wild Rice harvesting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## What is the issue?

- Wild rice, *Zizania aquatica* is a native plant emergent along the shorelines of lakes and rivers in Minnesota. The plant once had wide distribution through the state, but since Euro-American settlement with shoreline disruption and water quality degradation, the plant's range has been greatly reduced.
- Wild rice is very sensitive to some types of water pollution, particularly dissolved sulfates, which upon conversion to sulfides in the presence of organic matter, harms wild rice in many ways. Since 1973, Minnesota has set a limit of no more than 10ppm sulfate allowed in waters that harbor the plant. In the past decade, that level was questioned by legislators responding to pressure from industry and cities which would have to comply. The University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency were given money to study the issue. While they came to better understand the chemical pathway through which

sulfates harm wild rice, they proposed a complex regulatory formula to control the precursor pollutant, sulfide, which was recently ruled unworkable by an administrative law judge. If you want to get into the weeds of this (so to speak) click here:

<https://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/background>

- **H.F. 3280** would abolish all water-quality standards previously set for wild rice. Because the complicated MPCA recommendation was knocked down in the courts, it would not be applied, and no standards would be set until the MPCA developed a “narrative standard” describing the protection required. While “findings” are provided that speak to the value of wild rice, no specific protection for it is offered in the bill. Effectively, wild rice would be unprotected from sulfate pollution for many years, if not forever.

### **How You Can Help:**

H.F. 3280/S.F. 2983 have been introduced and are moving through committees. A word to your elected officials (click here for contact info><https://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/legdir>) either by phone call, email or snail mail telling them your thoughts can be powerful. Believe or not, legislators seldom hear from constituents.

### **Anything Else?**

Let’s agree: Minnesotans all want to see wild rice flourish in the state.

The native grain is central to Ojibwa culture, both in sustenance and in sacred act. For more on this, click here: <http://www.nativewildricecoalition.com/cultural-importance.html>. It historically has nourished a diverse assemblage of wildlife in all seasons and especially in the fall, when migratory water fowl, such as Blue-winged Teal, Redhead and Canvasback ducks rely heavily on it for cover and food. For more on this, click here:

<http://www.nativewildricecoalition.com/ecological-importance.html>.

There is an ethical, cultural, economic and ecological imperative to assure its protection and further propagation.

But there's more to this story than concern over one native plant. Slender-stalked wild rice is a key issue for the nascent sulfide ore mining industry in northern Minnesota. Sulfate ore mining as proposed has a high probability of polluting the Lake Superior watershed (the Polymet mine) or the BWCA watershed (the Twin Metals mine and the PolyMet mine) with sulfate-laden runoff. If legislation sets a (low) limit of sulfate allowable in waterways to prevent pollution in order to protect a crucial cultural and ecological resource, mining companies would need to have in place stringent safeguards against leakage, and costly water treatment facilities.

**Our view:**

Apply the 1973 standards (10 ppm) set by the MPCA even if imperfect (they are a good example of a law on the books that hasn't been enforced.) When the water treatment proves inconvenient, or costly, let's support our industry and universities to work together to develop new technologies that are effective and less costly to treat and control sulfide pollution at the source. This research has already begun at the Natural Resources Research Institution with promising early results.