

**Senate Environment, Climate, & Legacy Committee Hearing  
April 3, 2025**

**Written Testimony in Support of SF 1247: Wild Rice Act  
Rev. Susie Hayward, Minister of Justice and Formation, Creekside United Church of Christ**

Dear Senators,

I am pleased to submit my written testimony in support of SF1247, the Wild Rice Act, as the Minister of Justice and Formation at Creekside UCC, a 750-member church located in South Minneapolis (formerly known as Mayflower UCC) and as a born and raised Minnesotan.

Our church's support for this bill is grounded in two of our fundamental faith commitments. First, to climate care and the protection of Minnesota's precious water and land, which we believe sacred. Second, to the religious freedom of our Indigenous neighbors and our commitment to reparative justice and healing.

First, the Wild Rice Act will ensure measures to protect clean water. We are blessed to have an abundance of fresh water in Minnesota and we must protect its health and wellbeing whenever and however we can. Without clean water, all life is threatened. Pesticide run-off is among the greatest threats to clean water. We appreciate this bill will offer measures to reduce pesticide run-off in Minnesota's fresh waterways so that not just wild rice, but all of us can thrive. God calls us to protect and defend life, which means protecting the clean water on which all life depends. This is the most fundamental of God's commands to us.

Water protection is personal to me. I grew up paddling in Minnesota's lakes, rivers, and creeks. My own understanding of and relationship to God and Mother Earth, my awareness of how to live in harmony with the earth and all life, grew thanks to the experiences I had being carried by canoe on Minnesota's waterways, learning to move with rivers' currents, to maintain balance on a deep, big lake on a windy day. Minnesota's water sources are central to my understanding of what it means to be Minnesotan and to be a child of God. I know I am not alone in feeling the work of protecting Minnesota's water as a deeply-held religious call.

Second, wild rice is not just any grain. It is precious to so many Minnesotans – including me, of European descent who grew up on wild rice soup and would stuff my suitcase full of wild rice during visits home from college. After a lifetime eating it, wild rice is part of me in some essential way, a part of my biology and my identity as a Minnesotan. But to my Indigenous neighbors – Dakota, Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, and others, I know wild rice is more than just a food to eat. They have shared with me that manoomin/psin is an essential part of their culture, playing a role in their ceremonies. It is sacred. Hence, to protect wild rice is also about protecting the religious freedom of my Indigenous neighbors. If wild rice can no longer thrive here, which it increasingly can't, especially in the southern part of the state, certain ceremonies

can no longer be performed. The ability of my Indigenous neighbors to practice their religious/cultural traditions and ceremonies is at risk.

Religious freedom is one of the foundational rights of this country – one that my own Congregational ancestors – the Pilgrims -- came here seeking, one that the Minnesota Legislature affirms repeatedly. But throughout much of our country's history, the religious freedom of Native Americans and Native Minnesotans have not been honored nor protected. In fact, until 1978 and the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act by the US Congress, much Indigenous religious practice remained outlawed in this country. This is a stain on our nation's history and our professed commitment to religious freedom for all. A commitment I know is shared by both Democrats and Republicans, people of faith and those of none.

I acknowledge the role of my own Congregational forebears in driving harm to Indigenous peoples and their cultural traditions in this country and in this state. They did this through promulgation of theologies that undergirded Manifest Destiny and in their participation in missionary work that included the establishment of boarding schools at which Native peoples' languages and cultural/religious traditions were violently suppressed. As a UCC minister, in recognition of how historical and ongoing and intersecting forms of colonialism, Christian mission, and predatory capitalism in the form of extraction have caused harm to Indigenous peoples, land, and water, I am committed to the work of healing the water, land, and all peoples who live in Mni Sota Makoce through reparative justice, led by our Indigenous neighbors.

This Act would be one small step to repair historical and ongoing harm caused to land, water, and Indigenous peoples and cultural practices. But it would be something that would benefit all of us who share Minnesota's land and water now – those of Native, European, Somali, Hmong, and other heritages. And, it would help ensure the ability of our Indigenous Minnesotan neighbors to practice their cultural and religious traditions and ceremonies that involve wild rice. It would protect their religious freedom.

We are so blessed to live in this sacred Northland. Let us do all we can to protect its native plants and its waters, for the benefit of us all, for the benefit of life. I urge you to vote to pass the Wild Rice Act.

Thank you.