

Senator FOUNG HAWJ
Senate Environment, Climate and Legacy Committee
Minnesota Senate Building, 3231
95 University Ave. W.
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Re: SF1247, Wild Rice Act

April 2, 2025

Chair Hawj and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity for The Nature Conservancy to comment on SF1247 (Kunesh). As the committee considers SF1247, we write to share our considerations relating to wild rice and how the proposed legislation is an important part of a larger conversation on impacts to people and nature, and could help address challenges facing Minnesota's native wild rice waters.

Wild rice (Ojibwe: *Manoomin*; Dakota: *Psíŋ*; Latin/scientific: *Zizania palustris*) is one of most significant, critical, and unique natural resources in the state of Minnesota. Minnesota has long been recognized as the center of wild rice distribution in the United States, with more acres of natural wild rice than any other state. Associated with the shallow lakes, rivers, and streams left behind by melting glaciers, wild rice is dependent on the hydrologic regimes and excellent water quality that is characteristic of these interconnected aquatic habitats sustained by both surface water and groundwater flows.

Even as wild rice acreage has declined in Minnesota, losses have been even more dramatic elsewhere in the United States, increasing the importance of Minnesota as a center of natural wild rice abundance. Wild rice is basic to the traditional diet, and its cultural, spiritual and material importance to Minnesota's Tribal Nations and people cannot be overstated. It is also highly valued by both tribal and nontribal citizens who participate in traditional harvesting and processing, who enjoy it as a highly nutritious, wild food and/or specialty product for which the state is known.

Past economic estimates of the value of hand-harvested wild rice to the economy exceed \$12 million per year for the production value alone, but this estimate is dwarfed by many other associated health, biodiversity, ecological and ecosystem service, experiential, amenity, food security, and cultural values that are more difficult to quantify (many of which are referenced in the proposed legislation).

In Minnesota, the Conservancy considers wild rice to be both a cultural and ecological keystone species, a critically important species and community-level conservation target for freshwater systems statewide, as well as an integrator of overall watershed health and resilience. In addition to its economic and cultural significance to Minnesotans, wild rice is one of the most important foods for waterfowl in North America, and provides food and shelter for many fish and wildlife species, including at least 17 species identified by the state Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy as Species of Greatest Conservation Need. The value of wild rice to wetland birds such as sora and yellow rails as well as mallards, wood ducks, and ring-necked ducks is widely recognized, however, many other species of waterfowl and wildlife also rely heavily on wild rice or the habitat it provides.

Despite a history of leadership in Minnesota from Tribal Nations, state and local governments, hunters, harvesters, and others in supporting strong protections for wild rice in water quality law, policy, and

special protections, wild rice faces continuing threats and challenges. Anecdotally, wild rice has been declining in extent and abundance for decades in response to habitat loss, water quality degradation (including nutrient, sediment, and other pollutant loading), hydrologic alteration (dams, artificial drainage and land use changes affecting runoff and hydrology), aquatic vegetation removal and shoreland habitat loss, competition or impacts with invasive species (such as common carp, invasive cattails, pickerelweed), and other stresses, including (at times) limited or inadequate enforcement of existing protections.

Many of these stresses have been compounded by recent climate trends that are expected to worsen, including increased storm intensity (particularly in early summer during the floating leaf stage when rice is vulnerable to being uprooted), hotter and more humid summers (disease), warmer winters with less ice / more variable snow cover. Recent published studies led by a Tribal-University of Minnesota partnership show that distribution and abundance of wild rice is continuing to decline, with these climate and land use variables contributing significantly to downward trends.

Although significant effort and resources are being invested in wild rice management and restoration, ranging from state and federal agencies to Tribal environmental programs, university partnerships, wild rice harvesters, recreational and nonprofit conservation groups, we don't always know enough about how to bring it back once these declines are set in motion. This underscores more than ever the importance of investing adequately in protection of our healthiest and most extensive wild rice waters, watersheds and flowages, as well as in research, restoration and management to learn what wild rice needs to thrive.

It is clear that additional wild rice protections are needed to confidently sustain and steward this special natural feature of our state on behalf of current and future generations. We encourage the legislature to strongly consider the proposed legislation and other ways that the legislature can address the need for sustained investments in assessment, monitoring, avoided impacts, water quality protection, research, collaboration, and enforcement – all of which, if implemented appropriately, effectively, and adaptively, have the potential to improve outcomes going forward.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Kristen Blann, PhD
Lead Freshwater Ecologist
The Nature Conservancy in Minnesota