

Spoken Version will be two minutes:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the omnibus bill. I urge you to include the Wild Rice Act, or SF 1247, in the SF 2077 omnibus appropriations bill.

While we've heard the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) state that wild rice is already protected under current law, those of us who spend time on the wild rice beds and on the water know firsthand that these protections are insufficient. The Wild Rice Waters maps are essential tools for identifying which waters are capable of supporting wild rice. Not only do they highlight areas where wild rice is thriving, but they also provide a foundation for restoration efforts. By understanding which waters are currently healthy enough to sustain wild rice, we can focus efforts on restoring these vital ecosystems and working to bring wild rice back to areas where it has declined.

By developing and utilizing the Wild Rice Waters maps, we can also identify which waters are most vulnerable to harmful projects being proposed across Minnesota. There are several such projects that pose a significant threat to wild rice ecosystems, and without clear absolute knowledge of where these critical waters are located, we risk irreparable damage. Having precise and reliable data about wild rice waters will not only guide our conservation efforts but also ensure that we are honoring and protecting this treaty protected food as these projects move forward. It's crucial that we safeguard these waters from exploitation and destruction to uphold both ecological and legal responsibilities.

Wild rice serves as a biological indicator of the health of our ecosystems. It's been described as the "canary in the coal mine"—and for good reason. When wild rice begins to disappear, it's a clear sign that we need to take immediate action. Just as wild rice depends on clean water to thrive, so do we. Our survival is tied to the health of our waters and wild rice.

I ask that you support this legislation and help ensure the protection of water and wild rice, the sources of life for future generations.

The issue at the core of the bill is the need to recognize and honor the living beings we share this Earth with. They have an inherent right— separate from any right "assigned" by humans— to exist and thrive, just as we do.

In Anishinaabe culture, we understand that without all living beings we will cease to exist; our survival would not be possible. We show respect to our plant and animal kin, along with gratitude for this. This is what it means to recognize the inherent right of a living being. It is an invitation into a generational relationship of mutuality and whether we acknowledge it or not, that right exists. Recognizing it is a powerful first step toward fostering a deep respect for the Earth and all the living beings that call it home..

Recognition of an inherent right of a plant is fundamentally different from granting it the same rights as a person. In fact, it does not "grant" rights at all. To do so would imply that we hold dominion over the plant and animal world; we do not. In the words of Chief Seattle, "We are

a part of the Earth and it is a part of us.” This understanding is a central piece of Indigenous cultures rooted in respect, balance, and reciprocity.

This concept, though, is not a religious belief. It is, instead, a central part of our culture. The distinction is significant.. Religion focuses on a person’s belief about the divine. Culture is a way of life, a way of interacting with the world here and now. For example, a disagreement about when the divine creates life is religious. But Americans who disagree on that issue may still find cultural common ground.

Wild rice does have a spiritual dimension for many Anishinaabe people. Our stories tell of a prophecy that instructed our people to migrate west to where the food grows on the water. They tell of why wild rice is important to us as a people. SF 1247 cannot and would not make these spiritual teachings law.

The United States has worked hard to erase my people's culture through acts of genocide and the forced assimilation of boarding schools. Take a brief look back at U.S. history and you will see it is a miracle that we are still here, out in the spring enjoying the sweetness of the maple season. Our culture is a story of resilience and hope and it remains intact, and it remains dependent on the connection with the land around us. This legislation is about recognizing that relationship and protecting it for generations to come.

Senator Wessenberg spoke about his religious desire to protect the unborn. In a way, Anishinaabe cultural practices do exactly that. A central part of Anishinaabe culture is looking out for the seventh generation, meaning we act today with respect for the children that will come seven generations from now. They have not yet come into this world, but will. I ask you all: What kind of world are we leaving them? Will there be food, clean water, and these lands of abundance to sustain them? Will they have the ability to practice their culture?

This is where our values align with yours, Senator Wessenberg. Those unborn children or next generations should have rights that we honor today. They should have the right to drink clean water, breathe clean air, and continue traditions like the harvest of wild rice. And because those children are not yet here, we must do the work to protect their rights. By protecting wild rice today, we honor not just the past, but also the future generations who will rely on it for food, culture, and connection to the land. If we protect that then we protect future generations or the unborn.