

## New battles on the horizon for the Sokaogon Mole Lake Chippewa rice harvesters

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Rice Lake played a key role in the historic Crandon mine controversy and with the passing of new legislation, some tribal members fear it could be threatened again.

Although the proposed mine was known by the name of the nearby town of Crandon, the site lay adjacent to the Mole Lake reservation of the Sokaogon Ojibwe. The Ojibwe feared the consequences that runoff from the sulfide mine could have on the reservation's Rice Lake, a site of immense cultural and historical importance to the band.

The Ojibwe people, of the Sokaogon Chippewa, have always considered it a sacred place. Legend says that the Creator *Gitché Manitou*

(anishinaabemowin language) guided them to this lake because of the naturally occurring wild rice which proliferates there. The rice which grows in this tiny lake; mostly unencumbered, has always been central to the cultural identity for the Sokaogon, who are commonly known as wild rice harvesters.

The Sokaogon believe that wild rice is a gift of the Creator and it is called *manoomin* which means the food that grows on water, harvested during late summer each year.

Mining applications for the Crandon mine from several mining companies, primarily Exxon, hung in limbo, under debate and review for decades. A law passed in 1998 imposed a moratori-

um on sulfide mining that effectively blocked the mine from opening.

In 2003, the Forest County Potawatomi community and the Sokaogon Chippewa of Mole Lake community, purchased the mining rights to the proposed Crandon Mine from the Northern Wisconsin Resource Group's interest in Nicolet Minerals Co. for \$16.5 million, effectively ending the debate.

A new law has the tribes gearing up for another fight if it becomes necessary.

Governor Scott Walker signed a bill authored by Sen. Tom Tiffany, R-Hazelhurst, with Rep. Rob Hutton, R-Brookfield, into law in December of 2017, essentially lifting the state's moratorium on open pit mining.

Supporters of the bill argue it allows conversations about mining to occur that could not happen under the 20-year-old law. Tiffany and Hutton emphasized that companies that want to mine in Wisconsin will have to work with local communities in order to do so.

The tribe owns the legal right to regulate all water within its reservation, regardless of ownership, and has been determined that it is a reasonable interpretation of the relevant statutes and regulations. What this means is that any business or industry that has a desire to open a business, north of Mole Lake, must prove that the business follows all water quality standards owned by the Sokaogon Chippewa.

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