

Stream of Thought

Manure Maneuvers

No issue has inflamed River Alliance members and constituents in my short tenure here quite like the early March fish kill in western Dane County. The fish kill was caused when cow manure ran off into the freshly restored West Branch of the Sugar River.

It wasn't merely the loss of up to 200 fish in that stream. It was also the fact that the stream had just stepped off the pedestal of public honor. Last fall, the DNR secretary, the Dane County executive and local conservation groups celebrated the completion of nearly \$1 million and 30 years of restoration work – restoration that was largely done to repair the damage from sloppy farming practices.

The incident seemed to set off a welcomed “go get ‘em” attitude at the DNR, which pledged to prosecute three livestock farmers guilty of fish-killing manure spills elsewhere in southwestern Wisconsin last summer.

Reports from members around the state and a quick tour I conducted with River Alliance member Gary Eldred to Lafayette County – site of one of the spills DNR now plans to prosecute – uncovered more disturbing facts, revealing that manure spills are not aberrations, but routine occurrences. In a single day in February, there were three spills into public waters in Lafayette County alone. The Lafayette County farmer guilty of last summer's fish-killing spill seems to have a habit of it: that incident is at least the third one caused by that farm in the past several years.

So if these are not occasional accidents, what are the underlying causes? There are several:

- New manure, old mentality: many land conservation professionals say that when farmers expand from 60 or 80 cows to 250 or 500 cows, their mindset about manure hasn't changed, even though the quality and quantity of manure has changed dramatically. In the words of one soil scientist, “They still see it as a waste product to get rid of.”
- The role of money: When the polluted runoff rules were passed in 2001, neither farmers nor the rest of Wisconsin residents got any help from the state's most influential farm organization, the Farm Bureau. The Bureau convinced legislators

that the rules should not be implemented unless the farmers had financial assistance from the state for pollution-preventing practices and structures. Because there has never been money budgeted for “cost-sharing,” the hollow ring of unenforceable rules continues to resound around these manure spills.

The River Alliance is one of 30+ conservation organizations promoting increased “cost-share funding” for farmers in the state budget. Although we were happy to see Governor Doyle include \$2 million for the biennium, that amount could be spent in one county alone.

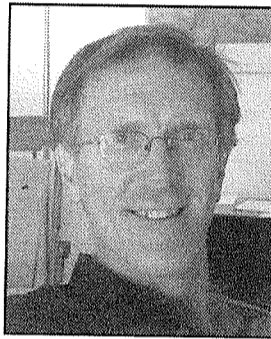
• Farmers' disproportionate influence on Wisconsin politics: Although, as voters, farmers are few in number, as a community they are respected for their hard work and risk-taking. Policymakers' eagerness to protect farmers translates into a level of political influence that is reflected in the oft-repeated notion of

“You wouldn't want to pass something that would drive the small farmer out of the business.”

• A question of size? Though it would be easy to jump on the “stop factory farming” crusade, the “spillers” are both big and small farms. Two tours of western Dane County in recent weeks showed me that those revered small family farms are plenty guilty of bad farming.

By the same token, one “mega dairy farm” we visited has made impressive gains managing manure by digesting it to produce methane. Kenn Buelow's Holsum Dairy in Calumet County offers what appears to be a viable option for making manure more benign, all the while generating electricity for 700 homes, and making animal bedding and dry fertilizer products.

For farms that can't justify a methane digester, a change of mindset, more cost-share funding, and prosecutions of scofflaws all need to happen to reduce or eliminate fish kills and river contamination. In the meantime, there will likely be more fish kills and the slack we have cut farmers for the reasons stated above will continue.



A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Denny Caneff".

Denny Caneff
Executive Director