

Two agencies name manure management task force

High-profile manure spills draw attention to problems with manure storage, handling during winter

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A diverse group of farmers, nutrient management experts, water quality officials, anglers and environmentalists were named this week to a joint agency task force to address manure management issues.

A number of high-profile manure runoff incidents this year led to the Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection naming the 16-member task force, which is being co-chaired by Ag Board member Brian Rude and Steve Born, a retired University of Wisconsin professor and member of Trout Unlimited.

Rude is with Dairyland Power and is representing DATCP on the task force. Ag Secretary Rod Nilsestuen said he was

pleased Rude agreed to co-chair the task force since he has been actively working on projects for manure digesters and is from Coon Valley, home of the nation's first watershed program.

Nilsestuen said the task force is being asked to address the problems and challenges of manure runoff, and to find both short- and long-term solutions to runoff problems.

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Rod Nilsestuen, ag secretary, on the naming of a manure management task force.

"It's a thorny and many-sided issue," Nilsestuen said, but added that he believes there can be solutions to the challenges of handling manure that will be beneficial for farmers. "Twenty years ago we were

talking about how many acre-inches of whey could be spread on land. Now, there isn't a cheese plant in the state that's spreading whey, because now it's a profit center."

Nilsestuen believes that, someday, farmers could see the same thing with manure. (See sidebar.)

"There are very real concerns with winter spreading, well contamination," he said. "We want to change this so manure can be a profit source, not a penalty source."

The ag secretary said one of the top priorities from his office to the task force is to come up with an emergency response system. "Nobody wins when we are reactive to a problem. We need to be proactive with this. There are innovative ways we can have administrative responses. At the front end we think there are things we can do to have an emergency response system – to help farmers if there is a spring like this past one," Nilsestuen said.

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In a joint press conference Tuesday (May 31) with Nilsestuen, DNR Secretary Scott Hassett said it has been a very bad year, in terms of manure runoff, with fish kills – the only good to come out of it, he added, was that it focuses attention on the problem and begs for a solution.

A high-profile manure event in Dane County killed brown trout in the lower branch of the Sugar River, a popular fishing stream; a similar spill in Vernon County; and contamination of private water wells in Manitowoc and Dodge were but a few of the 30 manure-related events documented by his department in the last 17 months.

Of those cases, six have been referred to the Department of Justice for prosecution, he said.

Hassett did not have figures from his agency to show if that number of events was greater or less than what has been seen in other years. In northeastern Wisconsin, the geology has made it possible for manure to get down into groundwater supplies; in other parts of the state the problems came from liquid manure combined with winter rain.

"There may be far more that we haven't documented because nobody sees them," Hassett said. "Some of the problems stem from the fact that farmers have converted from solid manure to liquid manure," he said.

Nilsestuen said the two departments' primary expectation from the task force is to have voluntary, industry-driven prevention strategies and emergency responses. The task force will be asked to make sure there is good incident reporting, along with corrective and enforcement actions.

Hassett said he hopes the group comes up with a range of manure management practices and strategies for long-term storage and spreading, along with innovation



ROD NILSESTUEN

and new and better practices.

The first meeting of the task force has yet to be scheduled, but the two departments expect the group to have a number of meetings in various locations around the state. The group, which includes several manure haulers, may be asked to consider measures like the need for licensing custom manure haulers and long-term alternatives to manure storage and spreading.

"It is time for a comprehensive approach to resolve these manure management issues. Working with our partners, I am confident that practical solutions are within our reach," Hassett said.

Hassett said he expects recommendations from the group by December, so they can be presented to a joint meeting of the citizen boards of the two departments in February.

A technical support group also will be formed to assist the task force. The techni-

cal support group will include farmers, staff from the state Agriculture Department, the University of Wisconsin, the Department of Natural Resources, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and public health specialists from the Department of Health and Family Services.

Task force members:

- Brian Rude, Dairyland Power and DATCP Board member representing the agriculture secretary;
- Steve Born, retired UW professor and member of Trout Unlimited;
- Kevin Erb, UW Cooperative Extension;
- Kevin Connors, director, Dane County Department of Land and Water Resources;
- Jay Richardson, Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin;
- Richard Gorder, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation;
- Dan Brick, Dairy Business Association;
- Wally Lueder, Wisconsin Farmers Union;
- Monte Wick, Farmers Cooperative Supply and Shipping, West Salem;
- Dana Cook, manure hauler, Sauk County;
- Robert Selk, Trout Unlimited;
- Lisa Conley, Wisconsin Association of Lakes;
- Rebecca Power, River Alliance of Wisconsin;
- Andrew Hansen, Midwest Environmental Advocates;
- Dan Fisher, Manitowoc County Executive; and
- Ken Blomberg, Rural Water Association.