

Tile line installer reflects on importance of agriculture

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NEWTON

The assigned topic for Joe Pagel, a tile installer from Kewaunee County, at a Manitowoc County Extension Service field day was the maintenance of field tiles on farms. He talked a bit about that but chose instead to use the occasion to talk mainly about maintaining a dairy-based agriculture structure in Wisconsin.

On a sweltering early August day in a tiled wheat field on the Harlan and Greg Gries farm, Pagel addressed a crowd of 45 people, about two-thirds of them members of the area's Centerville Citizens for Air, River and Environmental Solutions group. He called on the members of CARES and similar organizations to stop pointing fingers at dairy farmers and help them instead. CARES has filed a lawsuit against Maple Leaf Dairy, the largest dairy operation in Manitowoc County, on the grounds that its manure handling and other management practices have degraded air quality in the area and caused environmental damage in nearby streams and Lake Michigan.

"We're all guilty of being complacent," Pagel remarked. "I anti a lot of things. But I'm not anti-Wisconsin or anti-people. Let's stop pointing fingers and find answers."

While he agreed that getting rid of all livestock would solve any problem that manure causes in the environment, Pagel emphasized that far more would be lost as a result. Wisconsin's agricultural crops would then become a rotation of corn, soybeans and wheat, while alfalfa, a crop very important for maintaining the structural integrity of the soil, would virtually disappear, he warned.

It is essential that Wisconsin keep the dairy sector as the core of its agriculture

boast of having 10 of the country's top 25 livable cities.

Pagel noted that until the late 1990s he was a part of Wisconsin's dairy sector with a herd of 400 high-producing dairy cows (a 30,000-pound herd milk production average) in Kewaunee County. "I thought the world was perfect then," he acknowledged.

Then, on Aug. 18, 1997, Pagel acquired the assets of a business that got him started on field tile installation. After six months in the business, he noticed he generated more net income from it than from the dairy herd. When that happened again over the next six months, Pagel sold the dairy herd.

Today, Pagel believes he has lifetime job security for installing field tile. He noted he installed nearly 1 million feet of tile in five counties during 2004. He has a five-page waiting list of clients at the moment.

Farmers want their fields tiled (either a new installation or replacement of failing tile) because the drainage of excess water improves crop growth and yields while reducing weed pressure, Pagel remarked. "Tile means healthier plants and healthier people." He promised that much more tile is going to be placed on agricultural land.

Members of the CARES contingent at the field day were concerned that field tiles can be a conduit for pollutants from the soil surface to field waterways, creeks, streams, rivers and lakes. Pagel said it is easy to check the chemical composition of the water emerging at the tile outlets.

But even without a chemical analysis, Pagel indicated that the water's color alone provides a good test. He said clear and brown water is acceptable but that green, yellow, black or foamy water is a sign of a problem. (Among the possibilities is that a

smoke bomb demonstration, repeated for the crowd at the field day, by Ohio soil scientist Frank Gibbs, something Pagel wouldn't have bet would be possible.

A smoke bomb injector was connected by a hose to an opening in the field tile on the Gries farm. When the bomb was exploded, the smoke traveled in the underground tile until it emerged at dozens of places through the earthworm pores in the soil that ran all the way from the tile 2 to 3 feet below to the soil surface.

In a separate presentation, Gibbs explained that the smoke bomb demonstration shows how, in reverse, liquid manure placed on the soil surface or injected several inches into the soil could easily enter the tile line as a contaminant. He called for research money - which he claimed no public or private entity is interested in providing - for what percentage of solids is needed in manure to prevent the infiltration to tile lines from happening.

Reacting to what he first observed two days earlier (Gibbs' smoke demonstration), Pagel said an easy answer to the "Now what?" question would be to dispose of all livestock to resolve the manure dilemma. He believes, however, that such a course

of very large dairy farms in Wisconsin, the changes cannot be carried out instantly. Pagel chastised members of CARES for apparently believing that immediate changes can be made and for hiring lawyers, putting the Department of Natural Resources and other public agencies in the middle, and calling on the judiciary to settle a dispute rather trying other means to get a resolution to the wrongdoing they believe is occurring on Maple Leaf Dairy. The dairy expansion plans are on hold because of a Manitowoc County Circuit Court judgment ordering the DNR to re-evaluate whether it had conducted adequate studies about Maple Leaf's impact on water and air quality.

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A member of CARES tried to get Pagel to condemn Maple Leaf Dairy, which has nearly 4,000 dairy cattle at its main and four satellite sites within two miles of Lake Michigan, for most to all of the cladophora algae growth and follow-up odorous decomposition along the lake shore in recent years.

Pagel said he is familiar with the situation but suggested there is no way to link it to a particular source or cause. Citing Shawano Lake, which typically turns green for several weeks during the summer, he said what's happening in Lake Michigan could be part of a natural cycle in a body of water.

It is not arrogance but rather economics that had led to the formation of a number of very large dairy farms in Wisconsin,