

DNR Regulations on Manure Spreading Can Protect Children and Trout Alike

*Opinion Editorial by Andrew Hanson, Staff Attorney
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This summer, the DNR is proposing new regulations to deal with a pressing public health and environmental hazard - liquid manure from Wisconsin's largest livestock operations ending up in our private wells and in our trout streams.

These large livestock operations come by many names – factory farms, livestock factories, mega-farms, or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (“CAFO’s”) – and they make up a tiny fraction of the state’s livestock farms but account for about 10% of all the livestock raised here. And, they all have one thing in common: they produce millions of gallons of liquid manure and tons of solid manure as a waste byproduct of Wisconsin’s livestock industry.

That means fewer farms with more cattle – and more manure that needs to be disposed of more often.

There is no doubt that manure can be a natural and environmentally beneficial source of fertilizer for growing crops when it is applied under the right conditions. But it makes sense, environmentally and economically, to apply manure when it is likely to stay on the field, *not* when the ground is frozen and snow-covered, which is when the risk of runoff is highest.

As 2005 draws to a close, the DNR has documented more than 59 manure spills in the past year alone, 12 of which polluted private wells used by Wisconsin families and 12 more that caused fishkills.

The fish are not the only ones hurting. Wisconsin’s kids and families are suffering, too. In the spring of 2005, the DNR documented that four private wells were contaminated in Dodge County by the application of manure on frozen and snow-covered ground, likely by a nearby livestock factory. More wells in Brown County also appeared to be contaminated with manure spread during the early spring of 2005. And, in 2004 a Kewaunee County family, including a seven-month old baby, got sick when a livestock factory spread liquid manure on frozen and snow-covered ground near their home. In total, more than 30 private wells in northeastern Wisconsin became contaminated with what appeared to be manure in 2004 and 2005.

The bottom line is that winter manure spreading is an all-too-common, but very dangerous, practice. The risk to our children’s health and to our prized rivers and creeks is too great to allow it to continue.

Fortunately, the DNR is proposing to completely prohibit the surface application of liquid manure from February 1 to March 31 of each year, and during other times in winter when the ground is frozen or covered with more than four inches of snow. All existing livestock factories will have to meet this requirement by 2010, but all new operations will have to comply immediately.

Coupled with the spreading restrictions, the DNR is proposing to require at least 6 months of liquid manure storage for all DNR-permitted livestock factories by 2010. This storage requirement will help prevent the need for spreading liquid manure during these vulnerable times in the winter and early spring.

This is a very modest and reasonable proposal that will make sure that livestock factories do not spread liquid manure at times when the risk of manure runoff is the greatest. The DNR proposal should help prevent kids from getting sick from contaminated water and stop fishkills by keeping the manure out of our wells and streams. The DNR should finalize these rules to protect children and trout alike.

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