

Local fine for infamous manure spill?

Marathon County officials don't want to 'look the other way'

Like earthquake aftershocks, negative comments keep on coming about a million-gallon manure spill discovered this spring near the Little Eau Pleine River in western Marathon County.

County officials plan to investigate whether the county can pursue local fines against the farmers in addition to the \$464 penalty from the Department of Natural Resources. Some are decrying the \$464 as too small considering the belief that the dairy operation essentially pumped liquid manure out of a barn for nearly a year and a portion of that reached a waterway.

Paul Daigle of the Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department told a county board committee he would be meeting with the county's Corporation Counsel Scott Corbett about the offense discov-

ered in May after a citizen tip. The case involves the Patrick and Damian Willcome farm in rural Spencer, but Daigle, Corbett and other officials also will discuss how the county might handle similar cases in the future.

Land Conservation and Zoning Committee members who are also dairy farmers were critical at the meeting. Kelly King, a citizen member, said, "It's a big black eye. I hate to see this. As a dairyman, I'm depressed."

"It really paints all farmers with that big, broad brush," said Sandi Cihlar, a county supervisor representing an area west of Mosinee. "This makes all of us farmers in the county look bad."

Cihlar noted that news coverage of the incident pointed out that larger dairy operations are under stricter rules than fam-

ily operations. Cihlar said the sentiment she heard was that the size of the operation shouldn't matter. "All farms should be required to protect the water."

Alan Kraus, a county supervisor, said the offense was significant, but not commonplace. Over the course of a year, Marathon County farmers spread about 700 million gallons of liquid manure on their fields. "Somebody didn't take care of about 1 million of those gallons." He said the message to the public should be, "This is not something we're looking the other way on."

Daigle, who is the land and water program director, has been with the department for 29 years and says this is the largest spill he has seen in the county.

"Disgusted" is how John Kennedy, the president of the Big Eau Pleine Citizens

Organization (BEPCO), said he felt after learning nearly three months after the fact about the manure spill. "Excess nutrients in our waters are the primary cause of toxic algae blooms, as well as other less severe impairments," he said.

The Willcomes stopped hauling manure sometime during the summer of 2013 and allowed the reception tank—designed to hold a week's worth of liquid manure from their 100-cow operation—to overflow. The solids settled out as they went down a slope toward a wetland and the Little Eau Pleine River, but an undetermined amount of liquid made it to the waterway.

Daigle says the fine would have been higher if a fish kill had been documented, but no dead fish were seen in the marshy area several hundred yards downslope from the barn. **CP**