

Little guys can pollute big

Lenient rules for small farmers will hurt them in the end

Wisconsin loves its small dairy farmers. We cherish our image of that industrious, close-knit family raising a herd of dairy cows in that classic red barn, next to a white farmhouse and small grove of apple trees.

But do we love that idea too much? Even to the point of hurting small dairy producers and endangering the water quality across the state? Perhaps.

Wisconsin, like every other farm state, faces significant water quality problems caused by runoff from agricultural fields. Rivers carry tons of phosphorus into lakes, where algae blooms are epidemic. Accumulated phosphorus-rich sediment in these lake bottoms can become so toxic that it creates zero-oxygen zones that run for miles, killing fish.

Public health is a concern. A spokesperson for the Metropolitan Sewerage District of Green Bay reports that this water body suffered a 30-mile-long dead zone in 2011 that lasted for 43 days.

Could Green Bay thus suffer the same fate as Toledo, Ohio, where a half-million people this month were told not to drink algae-poisoned tap water from Lake Erie? Some say it's only a matter of time.

This state addresses agricultural run-off with two distinct sets of rules. Dairy farmers with over 500 cows can only operate if they have a Wisconsin Pollution Discharge Elimination System (WPDES) permit through the DNR.

Under the permit, a farmer must have manure storage and spread manure according to state performance standards. Spreading liquid manure on frozen ground is forbidden. These larger farmers must pay to meet these requirements with no state cost sharing.

Things are different for small operators.

No permit is required. Winter spreading is allowed. Meeting state performance standards is encouraged, but not enforced. Manure storage is optional. The government must provide 70% cost share for any environmentally required practice, including filing nutrient management plans.

Why does Wisconsin have two sets of rules for the same industry? A recent incident in Marathon County underscores the absurdity of this practice.

In May, county and state officials finally became aware of a huge manure spill in rural Spencer.

Patrick Willcome and his brother, Damian, struggling dairy farmers with a herd of around 120, failed to haul manure from their barn for about a year, letting an estimated 1 million gallons of manure flow into a field, allowing some manure to reach the Little Eau Pleine River. About half of the spill was cleaned up under DNR orders.

The rest, including an estimated 6,000 pounds of phosphorus, was released into the wetlands and waters.

The fine for this massive spill? Was it the \$30,000 to \$50,000 penalty that large, permit-holding farms typically pay? No.

The fine was \$464.

The problem isn't just that some Spencer farmers perpetrated a major environmental crime and got only a slap on the wrist.

The real problem is that state environmental regulations for small dairy producers are so lenient that they incentivize poor practices, sloppy management and sometimes massive intentional pollution.

Over the past two decades, large dairies have been forced to find better ways to manage manure—because of both grumbly neighbors and DNR wardens. The result is that these large dairy producers are better farmers for it. They've found ways to put their manure to work for them in the ground. They harvest better crops, improving their bottom line.

Small farmers, treated more kindly by a sympathetic public, in essence haven't been helped by loose regulations.

At some point, Wisconsin will face a water quality crisis like Ohio is facing today. When that happens, strict rules for all producers will be ordered. It doesn't matter which political party controls Madison. The larger operators will be in a far better position to meet stricter standards than small operators. A fickle public may, at that juncture, learn to love big dairy farms.

It shouldn't be up to the same old environmental organizations to call for stricter regulations on small dairy farmers in the wake of the Willcome spill. For their own good, small farmers themselves should demand it. **CP**

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



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