

Bob Dohr, Daily Herald Media 9:52 a.m. CDT August 13, 2014



An unidentified water resource specialist takes water samples of manure runoff at a town of Brighton farm May 6 in this photo provided by the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department. (Photo: Contributed photo)

SPENCER – An estimated 1 million gallons of manure flowed unchecked from a storage tank on a western Marathon County farm for months, running into a nearby wetland and eventually into the Little Eau Pleine River.

The discharge at the 120-cow Willcome dairy farm on Century Road near Spencer was going on for about a year, according to Paul Daigle, land and water program director for the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department.

"Based on air photo evidence, it looked like they stopped pumping sometime in early 2013 and it went on until this May," Daigle said.

The owner of the farm, Patrick Willcome, pleaded no contest Aug. 1 to violating water-pollution regulations and was found guilty and fined \$464.10. He did not return calls seeking comment Tuesday.

Daigle said state officials learned of the violation May 2 when an anonymous letter was sent to the Department of Natural Resources indicating the manure storage facility on the town of Brighton farm — a tank designed for about a week's worth of storage — had "not been pumped for months and is running over."

State and county officials visited the farm May 6 to verify the problem and initiate an emergency clean-up, Daigle said.



Workers try to clean up some of the manure at a town of Brighton farm in May after an estimated 1 million gallons of manure flowed out of a storage tank and into a wetland over the course of a year. (Photo: Photo courtesy the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department)

"(The owner) paid for (the clean-up)," Daigle said. "We provided some technical assistance to get some emergency berms up and immediately stop liquid from continuing to run off into the waterways and haul it out in the fields instead, where it should be, so it can be a valuable crop nutrient."

Willcome could not be reached for comment, but Terry Kafka, DNR water resource management specialist, cited "mismanagement" as the reason for the pollution.

"They had two manure spreaders, but both broke," Kafka said. "I do give them credit; they were very receptive and timely to all the requests that we made."

The wet spring didn't help, according to Kafka.

"They were waiting for weather to be cooperative to get out on the field and then apply the manure," Kafka said. "That was also the time of year there were some fields they simply couldn't get to because they were so wet and they'd just get stuck."

Kafka said the manure flowed into an unnamed ditch and wetland, considered state waters, located several hundred yards from the facility. The runoff then entered the Little Eau Pleine River about a mile from the farm.

Kafka said there was no documented fish kill in the river because the manure was diluted by snowmelt.

Daigle said it's difficult to estimate how much pollution reached the ditch or the river.

"What happens in a situation like that is the solids separate out and the liquids keep going," Daigle said. "Some very potent liquids ... made it down into the wetland. I don't want to speculate what made it to the waters of the state."

The waters of the Little Eau Pleine eventually empty into the Wisconsin River.

Kafka said the state's estimate of the amount of manure discharged — using a September-to-May timeframe — is around 600,000 gallons. That's less than the million-gallon figure derived by Daigle, which used a year duration to reach the estimate.

In addition to the citation, Willcome was subject to an enforcement conference that spelled out provisions to ensure the problem wouldn't happen again.

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