

A tap on the wrist for manure polluter: Our View (Wausau Daily Herald-08/20/2014)

With no real penalty, polluters won't be deterred.



(Photo: Contributed photo)

A pool 10 feet deep, 50 feet wide and 267 feet long. That is how much space [1 million gallons of liquid](#) takes up. A million gallons would fill 20,000 good-size bath tubs, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

And that is how much manure is estimated by a Marathon County official to have [flowed from a farm in Spencer into a wetland and then into the Little Eau Pleine River](#) between early 2013 and this May.

The owner of the town of Brighton farm, Patrick Willcome, pleaded no contest earlier this month to fouling the water. He was found guilty and ordered to pay a fine.

That fine? \$464.10. For every bathtub full of manure that Willcome's leak poured into our water supply, he paid a little bit more than 2 cents.



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)

Opinion: [BEPCO: Manure dumping fine a 'slap on the wrist'](#)

Story: [One million gallons of manure dumped in Spencer wetland](#)

According to an official with the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department, an anonymous letter tipped off the state Department of Natural Resources to the fact that Willcome had stopped pumping his manure storage and allowed it to run over for more than a year. (The DNR estimate puts the spill at "only" 600,000 gallons.)

To their credit, state and county officials acted quickly upon receipt of the letter, visiting the farm within days and initiating an emergency cleanup. They say the problem is fixed, that Willcome was "receptive and timely to all requests" and that the problem won't be repeated.

We're not so sure. Even if Willcome has truly changed his ways, this case sends a disastrous message to would-be polluters.

To call the fine a slap on the wrist is an insult to slaps on the wrist. It was barely a tap.



Manure runoff flows near a farm near Spencer. (Photo: contributed photo)

It seems safe to assume that the farm saved money by not having to buy new manure spreaders or worry about waste disposal for as long as a year and a half. Is there any other conclusion than that he came out ahead?

It is not just farmers. The owner of any business might well be tempted to throw aside ethics and calculate whether polluting is, at least in the short term, a smart business decision. We need clear, shared rules and firm enforcement because we need to keep businesses from having an incentive to pollute.

In other words, we need deterrence, and it's hard to see any of that coming out of this case. Our water deserves better.