

DNR Levels Guns On Wright County Sewage Polluter

Could This Be The Shot Heard 'Round The State?

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When we think of bad sewage, it is usually in terms of health hazards and nutrient loading. This is what the shoreland ordinances allude to, but getting compliance can be a complex, drawn out process—so wearying, in fact, that the effort may not be made. Especially when the county is less than enthusiastic about sewage.

In a test case in Wright Co., Conservation Officer Jim Smith, acting on information from the Mink/Sommers Lake Association, cited a Russell E. Connelly for allowing untreated sewage to enter Mink/Sommers Lake. His authority came from a state law which prohibits endangering fish and wildlife by contaminating public waters.

In front of Connelly's home, there was a hole and a wash gully leading to the lake. Smith observed raw sewage in both the hole and the gully. It was visually and physically apparent, and that enabled Smith to write the citation.

Connelly pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and was sentenced to 60 days in jail, a \$700 fine, and 45 days to get his sewage system in compliance. There was cheering in the courtroom when sentence was pronounced. The sentence and fine were stayed and Connelly was given a year's supervised probation.

A Partnership—County, DNR, & Lake Association

Smith has been working with Willie Gibbs, Wright County's environmental health officer. Bringing the Connelly's sewage system up to code will be done under Gibbs supervision. Smith sees this as a partnership.

A third partner is the Mink/Sommers Lake Association. Mink/Sommers' President stated that dirt is already flying over at Connellys. According to Hinrichs, public awareness was raised last summer when Mink/Sommers went through a Lake Assessment Program with the MPCA. In addition, the lake has been part of the C.O.R.E. program, part of which involved poisoning out the lake's fish population, most of which were carp. Hinrichs stated that after the carp were gone and the bottom rooting stopped, water clarity immediately improved. Secchi readings went from 2 to 5 feet in a week. Mink/Sommers residents started to realize they could have a clean lake, and there would be no room for polluters.

At present, DNR has only the capability of going after "physically and visually" apparent violations. There are plenty of those in Wright County, and the rest of the state. The Greater Lake Sylvia Association is starting a program patterned after TIP (Turn in Poachers)—it will be called "Turn in Polluters."



Left, representing Mink/Sommers, President Dan Hinrichs; and County Conservation, Jim Smith.

What does this mean in the longer term? We know that "physically and visually apparent" polluters are just the tip of the iceberg. What about the dry wells and oil drums, and midnight pumpers? We have the technical capability to locate these "hidden" systems. Too long, we have seen the burn out and discouragement of volunteers trying to make something happen. We are almost a quarter of a century away from the state's passage of the Shoreland Management Act. Back then it was thought Minnesota's sewage problem would be fixed in five years.

This could be a wake-up call for polluters across the state. It could re-energize those volunteers who have been butting their heads against a wall. The message gets through with authority, when a name is printed in the local paper. (It made headlines in the *Annandale Advocate*.) This could be the "watershed case" (pardon the pun) where Minnesota got serious and aggressively addressed the sewage problem on a statewide basis.

We have received word that the Lake Osakis Association, which has been doing a septic survey with a grant from the West Central Minnesota Fund, has discovered some straight pipes into the lake. The DNR Division of Waters are aware of this problem. The Mink/Sommers case should give them direction. ■