

A River Runs Through It

The DNR explains why feedlots are polluting our streams.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

A few weeks back, we reported on the cattle and hog feedlot operations that are polluting trout streams in Wisconsin's southwest counties. You'll recall that Steady Eddy observed that cows standing in their own slop in the headwaters of the Blue River were "pissing up a storm." The Professor even took photos of them doing just that.

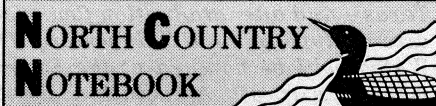
Steady also said that he figured only a handful of people would read that column all the way through, and they

would probably be "trout lovers."

Steady, as usual, was right on the money. A couple of "trout lovers" even wrote us about those southwest streams. One of the trout lovers who wrote is George Meyer, secretary of the Department of Natural Resources. Steady thought we should share Secretary Meyer's words with you.

"I took great interest," Secretary Meyer begins, "in your North Country Notebook article highlighting animal waste impacts on the coulee country's fishery. We at the Department of Natural Resources have been confronting the problem for quite some time. Now you and Steady Eddy are aware—and that helps bring it to the attention of others.

"We're familiar with the particular feedlot that you saw along the Blue



The number of cattle operations creates an overwhelming problem.

.....
River. Our southern district animal waste specialist has visited the site along the Upper Blue, and quite frankly, while this clearly is a serious problem, it is no more or less serious than many other runoff problems in southern and southeast Wisconsin. We have not specifically addressed this feedlot yet—by issuing a Notice of Discharge, which is a first step in an enforcement action. But this in no way

means we have written off the Upper Blue.

"Let me explain.

"Our animal-waste specialist is deeply committed to protecting our water resources and shares the same concern expressed by the 'Professor' in your story, but the topography and incredible numbers of cattle and farming operations in the department's 14-county southern district lead to an overwhelming problem.

"For example, seven of the state's top-ten-ranked counties in cattle and beef production are located within the southern district. A full one-third of the state's cattle reside within the district's borders. The district also has the top four beef-cow-producing counties and over 41% of the state's total beef-cow production. Our southern district is home to nearly 65% (765,000) of the state's hog population, including the top nine pork-producing counties, and has over 41% of the state's sheep.

"The number of animal-waste complaints received in the last calendar year totaled 125 in the southern district. We have one animal-waste specialist to cover the whole district. Our specialist investigated 70 of those sites. I think you and Steady would consider this substantial. The cumbersome nature of state law, lack of technical assistance from cooperating agencies (due primarily to personnel shortages or other work priorities) and the economic difficulties many farmers are facing are all factors contributing to this level of unaddressed complaints.

"We operate on a four-step enforcement approach. First, a site visit confirms that there is an animal-waste problem. Then we notify the farmer as to the nature of the problem. Next, a timetable is set for installing the best management practices to correct the problem, and we inform the farmer about where to go for financial and technical help. It is a very time-consuming process.

"Eventually, investigations are conducted at all sites, but for the time being, we're concentrating on cleaning up sites where we have already initiated formal cleanup procedures before we proceed on new sites.

"Resolving feedlot cases is the number-two priority in our animal-waste work plan. Responding to emergency agricultural spills is number one. So far there have been five emergency manure spills in the southern district, the smallest totaling 300,000 gallons. Miles of trout streams can be wiped out in a matter of hours as a result of a spill.

"North Country Notebook correctly points out that runoff from feedlots is not only DNR's problem, but the agricultural community's as well. This includes the federal government, other state agencies and local officials, especially at the county level.

"The state's Priority Watershed Program helps participating farmers install 'safe' animal-waste practices, and has been quite successful. Unfortunately, a few farmers, for lack of money or interest, decline to enroll in the watershed program or simply don't trust government, let alone regulation. This minority causes most of the major runoff problems and often negates progress made by the great majority of farmers who are good land stewards.

"We invite Steady Eddy to accompany our animal-waste investigator on a 'day in the field' at his convenience. This way he would see for himself the sites we are working on and get a better picture of a program that is trying to address a significant problem as best it can. By the way, tell Eddy to bring a tall pair of rubber boots.

"P.S. George, why don't you, I and Bud spend a day or half-day with Mike Vollrath, our southern district animal-waste specialist, to see some of the sites that Mike is working on."

We thank Secretary Meyer for the invite. Steady Eddy says we accept. ■