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Manure Puts Iowa -- and Iowans -- at Risk: Iowa Legislators Look at Bill Designed to Reduce that Risk

DES MOINES -- A bill that would prohibit the siting of animal confinement buildings within the 100-year floodplain passed out of the Iowa Senate Natural Resources Committee today. The full Senate will now consider Senate File 464.

The Iowa Environmental Council commended the Committee's passage of this important bill. Even stronger action is needed, according to Susan Heathcote, Research Director for the Council.
Since 1995, 1.7 million fish and countless numbers of other aquatic life forms have been killed by manure spills in Iowa. But the danger posed by current manure management practices and regulations goes far beyond fish kills.

"When someone asks me about the 'worst' spill we've had in Iowa, I always ask them, 'which worst spill?' Is it the one that killed huge numbers of fish? Is it the one that actually made it into drinking water? Is it the one that touches Iowa's most pristine natural places? There are so many ways these spills affect us."

Manure spills have been many and varied in size and impact since 1995. There is a common chord, however. These spills touch -- and destroy -- the very infrastructure of Iowa's natural resources. Some examples:

Largest Spill: On July 16, 1995, 1.5 million gallons of hog manure flowed from an earthen lagoon on a Hamilton County farm through an underground tile line to the South Fork of the Iowa River. This spill killed nearly 9,000 fish and countless other aquatic life.

Impact on Endangered Species: On July 26, 1997, a lagoon in Howard County overflowed sending an unknown amount of manure into Crane Creek, killing 109,172 fish, including 302 American Brook Lamprey, an endangered fish species in Iowa.

Spill into Drinking Water: In April 1997 hog manure actually reached underground aquifers in Wright County. These aquifers are the primary source of drinking water for rural and urban residents as well as agriculture in that county. The spill happened when manure applied to already saturated fields ran into an agricultural drainage well, sending pollution into the aquifers.

Repeated Spills into Same Body of Water: Tipton Creek in Hamilton and Hardin County was

impacted by three manure spills between 1992 and 1998. In July 1998 an estimated 420,000 gallons of hog manure broke through a plugged tile line and flowed through underground drainage tiles into Tipton Creek, killing 93,242 fish. The fish kill in this largest spill of 1998 was lower than might have been expected only because Tipton Creek had been hit by a similar spill less than two years earlier that killed 46,315 fish. Tipton Creek was also the sight of a 1992 spill, when a retention basin on an open feedlot overflowed, killing 34,994 fish.

In cases like Tipton Creek, polluters actually benefit from repeated spills. When previous spills reduce the fish population, there are fewer fish to kill in subsequent spills, significantly reducing the fines assessed for fish restoration. Perhaps the most disturbing spills of all are those which are deliberate.

Largest Number of Fish Killed: On September 4, 1996, more than 100,000 gallons of hog manure were deliberately pumped from a manure pit in Winnebago County. The manure flowed into North Buffalo Creek, killing more than a half million fish.

Greatest Impact on Prized Game Fish: In 1998 the owner of a Eitzen, Minnesota, hog confinement told a contractor to lower the walls of a runoff pond containing a manure and water mixture. The manure flowed from a dry creek bed in Minnesota to Allamakee County's Duck Creek. Duck Creek is one of the few places in Iowa where Brown Trout naturally reproduce. The spill killed 1,626 fish, including 24 Brown Trout.