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Manure spills causing many fish kills in Iowa, new report shows

An estimated 2.3 million fish were killed in Iowa in 134 fish kill events from 1995 to 1998, according to a report released today by the Clean Water Network, the Izaak Walton League of America, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Almost half of these fish kill events were caused by agricultural pollution, and the single greatest cause was manure or feedlot pollution.

The manure spills killed nearly 1.7 million fish and an unknown number of other aquatic species. Other sources of fish kills include fertilizer and pesticide spills, municipal discharges, and natural causes.

Livestock facilities caused at least 1,000 manure spills in the 10 states surveyed from 1995 through 1998, according to Spills and Kills: Manure Pollution and America's Livestock Feedlots. Pollution problems occurring at feedlots include lagoon breaks and overflows, improper land application of manure, equipment failure, and runoff from open feedlots.

"While fish kills are the most visible impact from manure spills and runoff, the damage they represent cannot be measured solely by kill counts," says Dale Brentnall, an Izaak Walton League member from Ames. "The cumulative ecological and health impacts far surpass each individual kill incident."

As an update to the report, 18 fish kills occurred in Iowa in 1999, according to an Iowa Environmental Council analysis of data provided by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. "Only four of those spills were caused by livestock manure. This is a significant drop from the 25 manure-related spills in 1998," says Susan Heathcote, Research Director of the Iowa Environmental Council. "We'll need to look at a longer period of time to see if this is a trend, because many factors, including weather, make a difference."

"We do, however, continue to have too many manure spills killing our fish and other aquatic life," Heathcote says. "We should phase out earthen lagoons, which are particularly risky because they are more subject to breaks or other failures than formed structures. In addition, sustainable methods of raising livestock should be promoted that reduce concentration of animals and utilize manure as a valuable fertilizer to be applied to the land in a safe manner."

Updated national standards for feedlot pollution are under development by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Also, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources is considering new rules for improved manure management. "It is important for the public to support these rule-making efforts to assure better protections for our water resources," says Heathcote.

The report is available on the Clean Water Network's website at http://www.cwn.org/docs/reports/spillkill/spillkillmain.htm.