

Hoard's Dairyman to drain manure lagoon

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Hoard's Dairyman Farm on the northern edge of Fort Atkinson is encountering new manure problems and has agreed to drain a 5 million gallon lagoon in hopes of keeping the animal waste from leaking into groundwater.

It's the latest development in a longstanding struggle by the pioneering farm to secure its football field-sized concrete containment system, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported.

The farm, which is just north of Fort Atkinson on the Koshkonong-Jefferson town border, long has been a laboratory and editorial resource for Hoard's Dairyman, an international dairy farming magazine owned by W.D. Hoard & Sons Co., which also owns the Daily Jefferson County Union.

While manure serves as a valuable fertilizer on cropland, it can be a source of surface and groundwater pollution if handled improperly or things go awry.

"It's been a huge, very unhappy experience," said Brian Knox, CEO of W.D. Hoard & Sons Co.

The farm was founded in 1899 by William D. Hoard, an early enthusiast of growing alfalfa as a feed for cattle who founded the magazine and served as governor from 1889-91.

Construction on the collection basin began in 2006 as the farm was undertaking modernization efforts. Federal regulations require all farms with herds of Hoard's size to have ways to manage the manure produced by the animals. Lagoons periodically are drained to cut into croplands as fertilizer. These systems are a common way of managing nutrients in farms of that size.

However, Hoard's 5-million gallon basin appears to have been built very near the local water table. Shortly after going into operation, the basin began leaking wastewater from the bottom of the tank. When the faulty construction was discovered, a 2-inch pipe was inserted beneath the floor of the basin to relieve water pressure, and since then, contaminants periodically have been detected in the pipe's outflow.

"There are various amounts of water coming out of this outflow pipe that appear to be clear water," Knox said in 2013. "It doesn't test to be clear water. It isn't brown like it's manure, and we've been recycling that water. It's not going to the Rock River, it's not going into the water supply; we have been recovering the water coming from under that basin and quantity-wise it, doesn't seem to be huge, but it is what it is."

In 2009, W.D. Hoard & Sons Co. undertook litigation against the contractors who built the basin and their insurance companies.

Watkins said the leak has been monitored consistently by farm employees, his office and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

The lagoon normally takes in the manure from the farm's 400 or so Guernsey and Jersey cows until it can be spread on cropland. But as part of an existing agreement with the county due to past manure problems, the farm started emptying the lagoon this month after tests from a pipeline connected to groundwater under the manure pit showed excessive levels of nitrogen.

"We thought it was getting better, and then this happened," said Mark Watkins, the county's director of land and water conservation.

Watkins said it is not entirely clear what effect the manure is having on the shallow aquifer, on which the lagoon inadvertently was built.

He said either underground water or the weight of the manure is creating cracks in the concrete. The lagoon has been shut down and repaired several times, he said. In July, crews began refilling the lagoon with manure and no problems were detected until this month when it was about 75-percent full.

Knox estimated that Hoard has spent "well into seven figures" for construction and repairs.

The manure will be applied to land that can accommodate it and trucked to other locations.