

Dan Ellsworth: City of Wausau's soiling of Wisconsin River shows media and environmentalists have it out for our farmers

Posted on Tuesday, Feb 6, 2018

On January 23, the City of Wausau piped 3.7 million gallons of raw, untreated human feces and waste directly into the Wisconsin River. Was this by accident? No. It was by design, as the waste was routed directly to the river by the city's sewerage system after a pipe leading to the wastewater treatment plant was plugged. Everything worked according to plan. As city officials alluded to afterward, the waters of the Wisconsin River actually were the perfect solution to the problem, as opposed to allowing sewage to back up into some Wausau homes.

3.7 million gallons of untreated human waste. 30 million pounds of wastewater. As much water as 40,000 households use in an average day. How was this environmental disgrace covered by the press? Did they hold the city's feet to the fire? Stand up for the river that is our state's namesake? Not even close.

The Wausau Daily Herald downplayed the event with 4 short paragraphs, mostly parroting the statement put out by the city. The headline tells you everything you need to know about the paper's bias: "3.7 Million Gallons of Sewage Leaked into Wisconsin River Due to Plugged Pipe." Leaked? Really? A "leak" is defined as "accidentally losing contents through a hole or crack". If this were a leak, it would have taken 10 years for 3.7 million gallons to work its way into the environment. This was not a leak. It was a dump.

How did the environmentalists react? Did they come unglued, the way they do when a manure pit slightly overflows? Not even slightly. No comments in the press coverage. No Facebook alerts. No calls for protest against the local water utility. No tearful sing-alongs on the shoreline. Nothing at all. Doesn't Clean Wisconsin care? Isn't the contamination of water supposed to be the most important issue for Kewaunee Cares? How about Saratoga Concerned, which has been so vocally protesting even the most environmentally progressive farmers? Nothing.

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It's just more example of how being a farmer in Wisconsin today is like being public enemy number one, and the media feeds into it. When a few hundred gallons of manure accidentally escapes a farmer's manure storage system, these groups are all over the press and social media, describing the spill as an environmental disaster. The media serves as a willing partner in helping these groups vilify yet another farmer.

But when millions and millions of gallons of human waste, drug residues, and Lord knows whatever else is flushed down Wausau's toilets and dumped directly into the Wisconsin River, it's silence from the environmentalists and a convenient whitewash from the media.

No wonder Wisconsin's farmers are down in the dumps.

Ellsworth is president of the Wisconsin Water Alliance.