Kansas City Star

Kansas City Star, The (MO)

as provided by Knight-Ridder Digital

August 4, 2007

Neighbors say nearby dairy farm contaminates their wells with manure

Author: KAREN DILLON, The Kansas City Star

Edition: 1
Section: FRONT
Page: A1

Article Text:

One winter day this year, Sandra Heasley was taking a shower when suddenly the water turned a dark brown and a revolting smell filled the bathroom.

It turns out her home near West Plains in southern Missouri is across the road from a large indoor dairy farm where manure was piled several feet deep outside.

Health officials cannot say with certainty that the manure got into Heasley's well water, but they do say Heasley's water was contaminated and it smelled strongly like cow manure.

Heasley and her neighbors have no doubt. In fact, the experience was a nightmare for Heasley, who said she took to her bed for a week afterward.

"Can you imagine getting in a shower and having cow manure coming through the shower head?" the 62-year-old woman asked.

Bill and Fran Collins, who own the farm, concede they have problems with the waste management system for cow manure, and they blame federal government engineers who helped install it.

They say Heasley's problem is not their fault and their own wells are not contaminated. They say Heasley is "nit-picky."

"We haven't done anything wrong, bu! t they act like we did," Fran Collins said. "I want to tell you that that woman's well over there is probably not contaminated from us."

But this week Missouri Attorney General Jay Nixon filed a lawsuit against Bill Collins and Collins

Dairy alleging violations of the state's clean-water law.

The lawsuit comes after years of complaints from neighbors.

The Collins Dairy Farm began a mostly indoor dairy operation in 2002 with a grant of $218,467 from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That agency also provided engineering assistance to build the waste management system.

The system allows the cows to spend most of the time in a feeding barn. Animal waste is moved from the feeding barn to two large pits and overhead tanks.

But the Collinses had trouble operating the system, and soon manure was being stacked several feet deep in pastures and dumped along Route K in a creek bed, according! to Missouri Department of Natural Resources reports. The Collinses al so used what is known as a traveling gun to shoot the manure up into trees, the reports said.

"The flies are so terrible here, they'll line up on a wire in the barn just solid," said Larry Swendener, a neighbor who said his well is contaminated. "It's atrocious."

Neighbors soon complained to the Natural Resources Department about the pungent odor of cow excrement and swarms of flies. At least two neighbors told the state their wells were contaminated.

Several neighbors said they don't want to see the farm go out of business, but they wonder why it has taken the Natural Resources Department so long to protect their health and their property values.

Department officials say that they have tried to work with the Collinses to persuade them to comply with state law. Twice the agency has cited the dairy.

Doyle Childers, department director, said in a letter to Heasley last month that the department is doing everything it can. Officials said this week ! that they have stepped up inspections to once a month.

The lawsuit filed this week says the Collins Dairy operation and its animal-waste holding pits are "water contaminant sources."

In addition, it says, Collins Dairy has discharged the waste into a tributary of Spring Creek since July 2005.

The dairy farm faces fines up to $10,000 for each day it violates the clean water law.

The Howell County Health Department says there is no doubt that Heasley's well is contaminated with E.coli and coliform, bacteria that come from fecal matter.

Justin Frazier, the Health Department's environmental supervisor, tested Heasley's water in early February.

"You could turn the water on, and it would get a filmlike froth on the top of it," Frazier said. "It's the worst-smelling water that I've actually done testing on."

After Heasley showered in the brown water, she said, she had no way to wash the contamination off.

Her daughter took her to a camping! area to shower.

She began buying water. To bathe, she heated it on the stove and then carried it to the bathroom in a dishpan while using a cane to walk.

Heasley also has been pouring chlorine in her well and using a filter, and the Health Department said this week that the water coming into her house is clean, although the well remains contaminated.

Ultimately, Heasley and some neighbors think they will need new wells, but that is expensive. Heasley's income comes from a $600 a month disability check.

Frazier said he could not be absolutely sure the farm was responsible for contamination without further water testing.

"You can't be 100 percent sure, but the dairy farm is right across the road from her," he said.

Fran Collins denies responsibility for contaminating the well but agrees the farm was having a problem with the waste management system last winter.

Government engineers told them to leave the manure in the pits, she said, but that was bad advice in the middle of winter.

"S--t freezes,"! Fran Collins said. "These cows don't stop s--ting because (the pits) are full. You cannot haul it out when it is frozen. The only option was to put it on the ground. So we put it on the ground."

Copyright (c) 2007 The Kansas City Star
Record Number: 200708040001KNRIDDERMOKCITYS_shower_080407