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What's to be done about pollutants that travel across the country?

by Joe Winter

Eco Catholic

A recent government study showed that about 75 percent of the polluting nitrates in the Gulf of Mexico come from manure runoff that travels down the Mississippi River from farms in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

These pollutants make it economically difficult for people who make their living by fishing in the gulf, especially those who gather things such as shrimp and only make enough money to live on the margin. These people were already reeling from the effects of the British Petroleum oil spill in 2010.

The northern farmers, too, have trouble making ends meet because their goods don't sell for near the money they used to. Some local bishops have long made it a priority to speak out for better economic conditions for such farmers and address this from the pulpit.

So a key ethical question in this story of competing agricultural interests might be this: Will the farmers take steps to limit the nitrates that run off into the water, which would further hamper their bottom line but help their farming brethren to the south? Should the bishops, in turn, alter what measures they call for? Nitrates are very harmful to the environment, which also affects the many businesses in the upper Midwest that make their living off of fishing and tourism.

There is one other social justice consideration here. The farms that produce the most murk often aren't the small, family-run ones but the bigger corporate farms, some of which have been called on the carpet by regulators and at times have even been required to pay monetary damages, court records show. An example of legalities getting involved was when such pollutants originating upriver found their way into a prized western Wisconsin trout stream. Local environmental groups have chimed in with both cleanup

and stewardship efforts and calls to farmers to limit their runoff.

It's simply a matter of volume, and the big boys have the technology to limit the nitrate pollution, which comes from stuff like feed lot runoff, but this could limit their profits. But should they be held to a higher standard than the mom-and-pop operations, and is it fair to promote unequal treatment?

The same diocesan officials have now become quite mum about these questions. "The Diocese of Winona supports the Land Stewardship Programs via endorsements of grants," said Joel Hennessy, director of the Office of Mission Advancement for the diocese in southeast Minnesota, adding that these programs address conservation and related agricultural issues. "We do not wish to make any official comment other than we do support land stewardship efforts for all farmers."

Directly across the river, the La Crosse (Wis.) Diocese became known a few years ago for the push their bishop at the time, Raymond Burke, made for social and economic justice for farmers before he was promoted to archbishop for St. Louis and then appointed to be a member of the Vatican curia. The diocese, which has the most frontage of any in the upper Midwest along the Mississippi River, would not comment for this story, despite repeated requests to do so.

Last year, a controversy arose when a documentary film made about this type of pollution from the upper Midwest was slated to run on public television stations but was scrapped at the last minute, allegedly because the content pointed fingers at farmers.

Adding to the debate were news reports that in the prior growing season, Minnesota farmers had one of their most profitable years in recent memory.

[Joe Winter is a freelance writer based in Hudson, Wis.]

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