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Photo by Jordan Crook

Fish kill

Lee Ponton looks over the contaminated water of Beaver Creek that runs through his property.

Posted: Monday, July 30, 2012 11:23 pm

By JORDAN CROOK Reporter | [0 comments](#)

One area resident's views on the expanded impact of fish kill

As Lee Ponton looked out across a bend in the stream Monday afternoon, a dead fish floated down the creek. As it floated by, it passed the bodies of two other fish, one trapped in the branches of a log and another baking on the bank of the stream in afternoon sun. These fish represent an estimated 63,000 fish that suffocated to death in a recent fish-kill on stretch of Beaver Creek near Papineau. Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and Illinois Department of Natural Resources Conversation Police officials believe the fish-kill was caused by liquid hog waste entering the stream. Evidence of this is clear when looking at the creek. What had previously been a pale green surface that a person could see right through is now a clouded dark brown brew that reveals nothing aside from the occasional dead fish rising from its depths. The creek also emits an unpleasant smell due to the contamination. Ponton's family has lived along the banks of this stream for 77 years and he himself has farmed near the banks since 1971, working to preserve as much of the wilderness along the banks of the creek as much as he can. In all of the time Ponton has lived near the creek, he has never seen it so devastated. "We've owned this property for 77 years, and in that time I have seen six feet worth of snow, I've seen floods and I've seen droughts, but I've never seen it as devastating as this," Ponton said. He believes this situation is worse than all of the others because the others were temporary as droughts would break, snow would melt and floods would recede. In this situation, the contamination must be washed away from the creek, a process that could take a great deal of time to be fully completed. For Ponton and others along the banks, the condition of the creek is upsetting. "It's devastating," Ponton said Monday afternoon, while standing at one of the places he and members of his family fish in the creek during the year. He said the only other time he can recall of a sizable fish-kill taking place on the creek in his lifetime was in 1977 when a severe freeze struck the creek and many fish were trapped below the ice. But Ponton doesn't believe the impact of the condition of the creek is



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limited to the the tens of thousands of fish that were killed. Ponton pointed out that the condition of the creek impacts the entire ecosystem surrounding it. Various kinds of wildlife, rabbits, squirrels and deer, all depend on the creek for water, while others, such as birds, depend on the creek's fish for food. Yet, due to the contaminated nature of the creek as it is now, many of these creatures will have to find other sources of food and water or risk drinking contaminated water. While Ponton feels that deer will likely be able to find other sources of water in ponds, smaller animals like squirrels and rabbits will have a harder time making the trek to find alternate sources of water. The human population of the area around the creek, which cuts through some 40 acres of timber, will also be impacted by the situation. Ponton explained there were several people along the creek, including hunting clubs, that fish and hunt near the river, and while some merely do it for recreation, others do depend on the bounty of nature to sustain themselves. He believes the state of the creek will likely also drive property values down for those who might be wishing to sell their houses along the creek. Overall, though, Ponton is most concerned about the ability of the natural beauty around the creek being able to thrive with the river so contaminated. "It's there to be enjoyed, not to be destroyed," he said. "It's heartbreaking, it's sickening." The entire situation surrounding the creek has left Ponton and others asking one question: "Why did this happen?" As investigators work to find the cause of the contamination, Ponton wants to be sure the party responsible for the liquid hog waste entering the creek, is held responsible for the actions, intentional or not, and not simply given a "slap on the wrist." Ponton gave the example of a bald eagle's nest that was recently discovered near the creek. He said the IEPA told everyone that the nest was protected and anyone tampering with it would face penalties. Ponton believes the wildlife living in and nearby the creek deserves a similar form of protection and those who have harmed that wildlife should face similar penalties. Ponton is encouraging others who live along the affected area of the creek to contact him in the hopes of setting up a meeting to establish a petition regarding the status of the creek and the cause of it to be sent to the attorney general to raise awareness about the situation. For Ponton, protecting nature around the creek is a matter of ensuring future generations will have the chance to enjoy it as the years go by. To secure that natural beauty, he said, situations like this must be prevented in the future. He feels that an effort needs to be made to ensure state officials are aware of the situation so that proper punishment can be handed down to the person or business responsible for the contamination of the creek and also to ensure that proper safeguards are put in place to prevent it from ever happening again. Anyone wishing to contact Ponton can call him at 815-428-7401.

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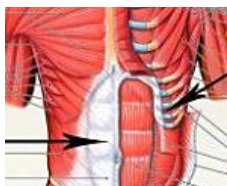
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