

Murray County Emergency Management

I will start with the backstory.

We understand that fish kills happen.

Our concerns are with the response and cleanup efforts.

In 2022 Murray County lakes were impacted with a significant winter kill. To get ahead of the response, I requested the MN DNR, and MPCA issue a press release, to detail what property owners should do.

The MPCA and DNR shared via email that fish could be composted, spread on farm fields and incorporated into the soil, or the fish could be left to naturally decomp.

Leaving the fish lay to decompose is not an option. Resorts, restaurants, and other businesses make their living on the lake, having dead fish decomposing on the shoreline is simply unacceptable. Would you like to dine outside whilst thousands of fish lay on the shoreline decomposing? I will add a formal press release was not pushed out.

The property owners and lakes associations banned together and picked up thousands of dead fish, but they had nowhere to take them. Local ag producers worked with clean-up groups. They allowed the groups to pile the fish in farm fields so the farmer could pick them up and spread and incorporated the first wave of clean up into the soil.

However, that was short lived, due to the farmers needing to plant their crops. Now the cleanup crews had nowhere to go with the fish.

State statue 97c.055: The commissioner shall remove and dispose of dead fish that accumulate in or upon the shores of public waters in quantities that area a public nuisance or are detrimental to game fish.

Through this entire response the DNR communicated they do not have the staff to assist with cleanups. He also noted that they had not assisted in cleanup efforts with other winter kills.

At the time of the cleanup efforts, residents noted the below actions needed attention.

Public information. Press release. State agencies should issue a press release stating what property owners can and can't do. Many different opinions were circulating on what property owners could do with the fish, but no formal press release or guidance document was ever given.

Clean up. Property owners discussed clean-up. What they are asking for is trucks, trailers and equipment to help move the fish. Sites and direction on what/where to go with the fish.

Executive Order 19-22 Assigning Emergency Responsibilities to State agencies states: State agencies may be called upon to respond to an/or assist in the recovery from the effects of these emergency situations and disasters. For these reasons, I order that: ... Section 1701: The DNR

shall be responsible for providing technical assistance, personnel and equipment for debris and wreckage removal from state waterways and state-owned lands, subject to the availability of funds.

The concern here locally is that we are experiencing a significant drought. Making lake levels very low, very similar to the fall of 2022. It's only a matter of time before another winter kill happens. In 2010, a similar winter killed happened. Again, property owners banded together and cleaned thousands of dead fish up. Then piled them to compost. However, had little direction as to where the compost site could be. Sometime after the site had been built, and filled with fish, the site had to be moved due to proximity to well heads.

Up-front, transparent communication is critical. Property owners are not going to tolerate a no response. They will clean up their property. They need timely and accurate information so they can handle things properly.

Minn. Stat. § 97A.025- Ownership of wild animals belongs to the state for the benefit of the people of Minnesota. The state has ownership of the fish and benefits from license purchases. Does the State get paid restitution for winter killed game fish?

The end of the 2022 winter kill had our Sheriff's office responding to calls for service because residents had nowhere to go with the fish they had cleaned up and no guidance as to what they could do with them. The result was loads of fish dumped in the middle of roads.

Takeaways from the guidance document.

The document should include a timeline of events. Example: Press release in 24 hours of a reported kill. Or releasing specific clean up days that MPCA/DNR will staff a compost site....etc
Winter kills or non-urgent kills. A response is needed. We understand staffing levels limit what the DNR can do. A satisfactory response could be as simple as leaving a couple Trucks/trailers sit so locals could fill them on weekends or scheduling certain clean up days to maximize efforts.
Declaring a compost site and staffing with MPCA short term to get it set up properly.
Communication and coordination with lakes associations, local governments, and the public. I will say that a non-urgent kill does not exist. Businesses need to clean up their shorelines to maintain continuity of operations. Imagine running a lake side restaurant and having mass of decomposing fish several feet from where people are dining.

The name of the document is Interagency fish kill response. It references what to communicate between MPCA, DNR, MDA, and USDA. Based off the flow chart (page 8), non-urgent die off equals no communication and is a low impact. At what point is information shared with local governments? Page 24 flow chart references fish kill notifications are published in weekly EQB monitor. The communication aspect of this is confusing. Many agencies are working on it, wouldn't it be easier to just operate under one agencies PIO?

Residents continued to seek information from March-June of 2022. During this time period, County Emergency management received over 800 phone calls seeking information.