

Text of Virgil Muench at Green Bay Water Quality Hearing, November 16, 1967

For approximately 20 years we have been having meetings and hearings concerning the pollution problems of this area. The reason for the hearing today, in a measure, reflects the impotency of the efforts of the previous ones. I hope this one will be more fruitful than the others.

As I understand the notice, it is proposed therein to classify the lower reaches of the Fox, Oconto and Peshtigo for the minimum standards allowable for "partial body contact recreation and industrial and cooling uses." While the technical terms involving toxic and other substances are meaningless to me, I think so far as the public is concerned, the minimum standards proposed mean simply we are limiting these waters to municipal and industrial waste disposal purposes only. I'm not sure what "partial body contact recreation" means, except for the implication that water so classified would be unfit and unsafe for total body contact.

I believe the proposed classification for these waters is wrong, unrealistic and totally damaging to the interests and well being of the people of this area as well as to all of the people of the state of Wisconsin. In fact, the very idea of such classification is, by itself, cause for apprehension.

While the notice also states that it is hoped lower classifications can be upgraded from time to time, what it really says is something like this; "We have, in the past permitted these waters to deteriorate to their present polluted condition. Now, we are going to tolerate the present degree of pollution and condone all the mistakes and errors of the past which permitted the present condition to develop. However, we hope that sometime in the future we can upgrade the quality of these waters". Unfortunately, once so classified it will be almost impossible to change the classification, because we will have, in effect legalized existing sources of pollution. Instead of setting our sights high from the very beginning of the new pollution control effort, we are writing off these rivers and making them the victims of all the illegal and unfortunate pollution of the past. We are admitting defeat before we even start to fight.

What kind of a standard is a minimum standard for a river flowing thru the heart of a city which would jeopardize the health of any human unfortunate enough to be immersed in it? And what are we condoning with such minimum standards? Aren't we condoning all the untreated septic tank wastes which have been and are now pouring into these waterways?

Are we not condoning all the inadequate municipal sewage treatment plants which we allowed to operate for so many years, many of them in defiance of orders for years and years? Are we not condoning many industrial wastes which could be cleaned up right now without even the loss of a corporate dividend? Are we not condoning the kind of philosophy which helped to bring about the present mess, that policy which justifies the plundering and exploitation and waste of vital natural resources and refuses to recognize that the right to use our resources for profit also imposes the obligation upon the user to try and protect them so far as possible for future users? And we are also condoning a philosophy which would limit a waterway to a few specific uses instead of striving to keep it as clean as possible for all the beneficial uses and wealth producing capacity water resources can bring to man.

But most serious of all, the proposed minimum standards for the Fox, Oconto and Peshtigo are bound to adversely affect the water quality of the lower Bay and ultimately even endanger the waters of Lake Michigan.

The Fox, at it's mouth has an average flow of approximately 1300 cubic feet per second. The Oconto, something over 300cfs and the Peshtigo in the neighborhood of 300cfs. These rivers form the main tributaries of the lower Bay. Translate cfs to gallons and we have some idea of the millions of gallons of water these tributaries pour into the Bay every hour of the day and night. Under this proposal, every one of those gallons will be of minimum standard water quality, fit only for partial body contact. Have we not the right to question what effect so much dirty water pouring into the Bay every hour of the day will have on that body? I doubt if we can pour that much dirty water into the Bay without creating a condition of progressive deterioration which will grow worse and worse with the passage of time. We just cannot afford to convert the Bay into a huge ugly receptacle for improperly treated human and industrial wastes.

It will be argued it is economically unfeasible to raise the standards to a higher classification, just as it has been argued from the very beginning of the battle against pollution. In 1949, when this argument was used, I asked, "What is more economically unfeasible than for a paper mill to buy an eight foot pulp log, use one half of it and throw the other half away while helping to destroy a vital water resource with the discarded portion"? Time has proven that a lot of money it was economically unfeasible to spend then to save the discarded half, now has transformed that half into useful by-products, substantially reducing wastes while contributing to reduce the cost of mill pollution abatement. In addition, it has the potential of developing into substantial profit margins, and that is wonderful.

Is it wrong now to ask if industry has fulfilled it's obligations in meeting the problems of waste disposal as a legitimate cost of operation? If everything so far accomplished and claimed to be accomplished has been done without curtailment of industrial growth and plant expansion, or without sacrifice of dividend payments, has not the argument of economic unfeasibility proved invalid?

There isn't a single community in this land whose Chamber of Commerce and businessmen do not constantly strive for growth on the theory that more people and more industry means more employment, more business, more money and more economic benefits. But such growth also demands more sewers and more efficient sewage plants and this in turn demands more taxes. Everybody wants all the benefits of this so-called progress, but nobody wants to pay for it. That is why it is so difficult for communities to maintain waste disposal facilities consistent with community growth and needs. So it becomes "economically unfeasible" for communities to properly dispose of their wastes.

Is it wise to consider these waters for minimum standards when we know that inadequate sewage plants, unlawful septic tank wastes and partially treated industrial wastes are the cause of most of the pollution now existing in them? Unless these existing sources are corrected, how can even the proposed low standards be maintained when more sewers, more industrial expansion and the impact of more people places even heavier burdens on these waters. Perhaps it is the proponents of low standards who are being unrealistic rather than those who oppose them.

I want to repeat the statement I made at the Manitowoc interstate water quality hearing, that, "strict effluent control with rigid enforcement thereof", is the only method we can honestly and effectively use to combat water pollution.

When we have achieved the best control possible, considering all the factors involved, only then can we say we have discharged our obligations in pollution control to this society and the future inhabitants of this country. And only then do we have the right to try and classify waterways if such classification then becomes necessary.

The natural resources of this nation form the basis for all our wealth and prosperity. Everyone knows that, and everyone knows it is in the national interest and the well being of the people, that everything possible be done to protect them from wanton waste and exploitation. Why is it so difficult to do?

One reason is the cry of "too costly" or "economic unfeasibility". Whenever this cry is raised, it might be wise to reassess and re-evaluate the validity of the challenge. We might start this re-evaluation by considering the fact that the money, which has it's origin in the resources, is always ready and available for personal and public entertainment, amusement and self indulgence. It is always available for political "pork barrel" and "boondoggling" projects. It is available for questionable foreign aid projects, while we have already spent more than enough on space to restore all our water resources which man has destroyed with his own filth. But it is seldom available to protect the very resources out of which the money is made, and nothing is more difficult to find than money for pollution abatement. But it is there if we sincerely want to find it and make the necessary sacrifices to get it.

That is one of the reasons it is so wrong to condemn the Fox, Oconto and Peshtigo to the low standards proposed. Sure, to so condemn them is probably the most expedient and the easiest thing to do. But in the end, if it means losing our Bay, it will be the costliest and most "unfeasible" solution to the pollution problem of these waters it is possible to conceive.

I firmly believe if every citizen, every municipality and every industry is willing to assume their civic and moral responsibilities in pollution abatement, the waters of this area can be restored for the complete use and well being of man and the community of life of which he is but a part. I don't see how we can do anything less and still honestly think of ourselves as an educated, enlightened and responsible society.

Respectfully submitted,

V. J. Muench

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