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## Slip-up by the Minnesota DNR allowed fish virus into state

The Minnesota DNR allowed 2,000 trout to be imported from Wisconsin to stock a rural Cloquet man's private pond. But the source hatchery had a contagious fish virus not found in Minnesota. The DNR had made a potentially devastating error.

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The state agency charged with protecting Minnesota's multibillion-dollar fishing industry from diseases allowed a virus potentially dangerous to fish into the state last year.

Last May, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources mistakenly approved a shipment of 2,000 rainbow trout from Wisconsin to a rural Cloquet man, who legally purchased them and put them into his private pond.

The pond owner, Curt Teberg, paid \$3,600 for the trout and never expected they would cause him months of headache.

A mutual fund manager, Teberg said he stocked the fish into his elaborately designed fishing pond, which he uses to entertain stockholders and hold charitable fishing events.

But soon after the stocking, DNR officials told Teberg his trout came from a Wisconsin fish hatchery that had tested positive for a contagious fish virus called infectious pancreatic necrosis (IPN), which had never been found in Minnesota.

The virus isn't dangerous to humans, but it can be fatal to trout and salmon.

Realizing their mistake, DNR officials told Teberg they would net and kill every trout in his pond. The agency spent \$11,000 in taxpayer money to "depopulate" the pond, test the fish and bury many of them in Teberg's pasture.

Tests showed at least one trout carried the IPN virus, though none showed signs of illness. DNR officials said they hope they prevented the virus from escaping into the wild.

The DNR has promised to replace Teberg's trout this spring with state-owned

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#### Fish virus

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hatchery trout, including trophy specimens.

"It was surreal," Teberg said. "How could this happen when the government has such tight rules and regulations?"

The answer: Top fisheries managers failed to heed warnings from the DNR's own fish-disease expert and misunderstood state laws written to keep fish diseases out of Minnesota, according to records reviewed by the Pioneer Press.

### PROTECTING STATE'S WATERS

Fish can get viral, bacterial and parasitic diseases, and the DNR takes the threat of those diseases seriously. To keep wild and hatchery fish from getting sick, Minnesota has some of the nation's strictest regulations for importing bait and commercial fish, said Roy Johannes, the DNR's aquaculture specialist.

Some of the laws go back to the 1960s, but some were updated in 1992 and 2008.

"From our standpoint, we have to protect a tremendous fishery," Johannes said. "We probably have among the top 10 walleye lakes in the nation. We have tremendous trout fishing in the southeast and on the North Shore."

Fish viruses can be difficult to prevent because they can spread through water and fish feces and through fish-feeding animals, Johannes said.

In recent years, a virus called viral hemorrhagic septicemia has caused major fish kills across the Great Lakes. It has been found in Wisconsin and caused serious concern in Minnesota and other Great Lakes states.

Since 2007, the DNR has spent \$231,000 on a testing and prevention program to keep VHS out of state waters, and new VHS laws are clamping down on fish importation.

At risk, said Johannes, is a \$2.6 billion Minnesota fishing industry enjoyed by about 1.4 million resident and nonresident anglers.

### AN EXTRAORDINARY TROUT POND

Curt Teberg is one of those Minnesotans who enjoy fishing — so much so that he has spent the past seven years building a backyard trout pond. Until last spring, he had never heard of the IPN fish virus.

His fishing pond is an angler's paradise. It is fed by a man-made creek and has adjoining waterfalls and a fountain. A well and aerator keep water fresh. The shoreline is extensively landscaped.

Teberg couldn't put a price on the pond's construction, but when asked if it was near \$100,000, he said, "We're getting close to it."

Teberg is best known as the manager of the \$27 million Teberg Fund, a mutual fund based in Duluth.

He said his trout pond has become part of his business life. He said he allows shareholders and their families to fish in the pond, and he has an ongoing charity fishing tournament with tagged trout.

"It's a fun event, and next year the pot will be \$10,000," said Teberg, 60. "Any one of my shareholders who catches one of the tagged fish has to write a check for that amount to their favorite charity."

"It's my entertainment," he said of the pond. "This is who I am. I hunt, fish and manage my fund. And I like to share things."

### A PERMIT REQUEST ... AND A SLIP-UP

Teberg's trouble began in late May, when he decided to buy 2,000 rainbow trout from Silver Moon Springs Fish Hatchery in Elton, Wis., for his pond.

Minnesota law requires that the DNR issue a transportation permit for fish moved across state lines; the permit allows the agency's fish-disease experts to ensure fish have been tested and are disease-free before entering the state.

A 1992 state law also requires that trout and salmon come from hatcheries that are disease-free for at least three years. The law also doesn't allow fish to be imported from hatcheries with IPN or other "emergency" diseases that have never been found in Minnesota and pose the greatest risks, Johannes said.

When it came time for Silver Moon Springs to ship its fish to Teberg, the hatchery manager submitted a transportation permit to Tim Goeman, the DNR's regional fisheries manager in Grand Rapids.

On May 27, Goeman forwarded the permit to the agency's disease specialist, Ling Shen, in St. Paul. Shen works in the DNR's three-person pathology lab, which approves transportation permits and investigates fish diseases.

The pathology lab is the DNR's primary defense in keeping fish diseases out of the state, Johannes said.

Shen said she looked at the Teberg paperwork and accompanying health certificate for the 2,000 trout. She noticed the hatchery had tested positive for IPN earlier in the year, and she telephoned a Wisconsin veterinarian to confirm the test.

"When I had confirmation the hatchery had IPN, I denied the permit," she said.



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DNR e-mails from May 27 to June 6 reviewed by the Pioneer Press show a string of misunderstandings and failures to heed Shen's warnings. Those failures would lead DNR officials to allow the fish into the state.

After Shen turned down the permit May 27, Goeman e-mailed her again, saying the hatchery manager was "arguing that only the fish going out of state needed the disease certification," not all the fish in the hatchery.

In her reply, Shen warned Goeman again that state law requires inspection and a clean bill of health for all the fish in the hatchery.

The same day, Goeman telephoned his supervisor in St. Paul, Linda Erickson-Eastwood, to ask her opinion.

Erickson-Eastwood is the DNR fisheries program manager. In a recent interview, she recalled that she misunderstood the disease in question and advised Goeman that she thought the shipment could occur.

"We had a misunderstanding about what disease we were talking about," she said.

The next day, May 28, Goeman approved the permit, and Silver Moon Springs transported the fish to Teberg's pond and stocked it.

E-mails show that, more than a week later, Erickson-Eastwood acknowledged the mistake with staff, and she and others decided to contact Teberg and make plans to quarantine his pond and fish.

The DNR's biggest fear?

That the virus could escape from the pond into adjoining waters that connect to Lake Superior, endangering the lake's trout and salmon population.

In June, the DNR drew up plans to kill all the trout and possibly drain the pond.

"I was totally blindsided," Teberg said.

**KILL THE FISH, DRAIN THE POND**

Tim Winkel, manager of Silver Moon Springs Hatchery, said his hatchery has never lost any of its trout to IPN.

"We have the disease in our brook trout, but it has never killed any of our fish," he said.

In fact, Wisconsin authorities said, it is legal for Winkel to sell his fish within Wisconsin borders, because fish-health authorities there don't list IPN as a serious disease.

"It has been found in private and state hatcheries," said Myron Kebus, Wisconsin's fish-health veterinarian. "In the last 10 years, we haven't had any significant fish kills in the wild or in hatcheries (from IPN)."

But Minnesota DNR officials viewed the introduction of IPN into the state much differently.

"It's a very bad one and on our list of emergency diseases," Johannes said.

But when DNR officials informed Teberg the fish would be killed and the pond would be drained, "I was ready to go to court," he said.

The DNR agreed to wait to kill the fish. While Teberg's pond has a connection to Lake Superior through nearby Grand Lake and the St. Louis River, the pond wasn't flowing last summer, giving both parties time to agree on an action plan.

After negotiations during the summer, the DNR and Teberg agreed in August that the pond wouldn't be drained, but the fish would be killed and buried in his horse pasture.

The parties also agreed that Teberg could keep and eat any fish still fresh enough to consume and that the DNR would replace all the fish it netted.

The DNR spent September netting the pond and shocking it with electricity, eventually capturing 374 trout.

While many more trout were stocked in the pond, DNR officials concluded the rest were either caught by anglers or died in the pond.

About half the fish were buried in a 10-foot-deep trench and coated with lime to speed decomposition and keep animals from the fish, said Dan Dexter, a DNR fisheries specialist who headed the project to eliminate the trout.

Teberg was allowed to keep and eat the rest, which Dexter filleted for him.

"Dexter was a real gentleman," Teberg said. "I liked him and his co-workers real well. I ended up grilling elk steaks for them one afternoon."

**NEW FISH ... AND NEW RULES**

At the DNR's request, the pond's aerator has been turned off for the winter, and the pond won't be stocked until spring. The DNR will test the pond for the disease for the next three years.

Shen said the odds were "very high" the DNR caught the virus before it escaped into the wild.

Although the incident caused him trouble and he missed ice fishing for trout this winter, Teberg said he has been satisfied with his treatment by DNR field staff, but not by DNR management.

This spring, the DNR will replace Teberg's 374 trout with trout from a state hatchery, which are valued at \$500 to \$1,000 total, according to John Huber, the DNR's Crystal Springs Hatchery supervisor in Lanesboro.

Giving Teberg the trout "will have no effect on our stocking goals," Huber said. "These are surplus fish from the trout program. The important thing is we clear this up with him."

Goeman, the fish manager who mistakenly approved the permit, said he regrets his decision.

"Obviously, the permit shouldn't have been issued," he said. "There was at the least confusion or misinterpretation and some miscommunication between myself and others at the DNR."

When the permit mistake was discovered, Erickson-Eastwood suggested in an e-mail to staffers that special disease training for managers and new protocols be instituted to avoid errors.

To date, those proposals have not been implemented, she said.

But Erickson-Eastwood said the DNR's response to its error showed a system of "checks and balances" worked to keep the virus from spreading.

"We should have never brought those fish into the state based on the information that there was IPN," she said. "I think we have it (the disease) under control. I think we've learned from the situation."

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## Fish disease contained

Infectious Pancreatic Necrosis (IPN) is a viral disease of fish. It is highly contagious and once past the mortality phase, fish can become carriers. The disease was brought to a private pond in Saginaw, Minn., (near Cloquet) by trout bought from Silver Moon Springs Hatchery in Elton, Wis. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources believes it likely the disease was contained at the pond and did not escape into the wild.



### The disease process

Fingerling becomes infected with the virus.

Fingerling sheds the virus via urine and feces into the water where it can survive for months.

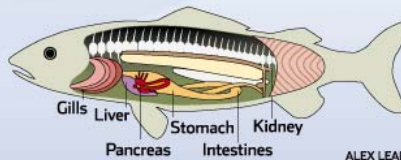
Older fish in adjoining ponds can become infected by birds shedding the virus in their feces.

Mortality rate levels off at around 90 percent, but survivors can become lifelong carriers of the virus.



### Symptoms of the disease and organs affected

- Sudden increase in mortality.
- Young fish may swim in circles.
- Skin can darken.
- Eyes may seem to pop.
- Stomachs can appear swollen.
- The pancreas is attacked by the virus, killing off tissue.
- Affected fish produce excess mucus in their GI tract.



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Source: La Crosse Fish Health Center



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