

Fishers charged in fish kill

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Photo 



Photo by [Dan Lassiter](#)

A large number of dead fish were found on the north shore of Lake Koshkonong in September. A pair of informants told the DNR that the fish were put there by two commercial fishers, who were netting carp to lower the rough fish population in the lake.

SUMNER TOWNSHIP — Two commercial fishers face fines and felony charges of killing nearly 700 game fish while netting carp in Lake Koshkonong last fall and then burying the fish along a shoreline in a plot to hide the kill, according to a criminal complaint.

Steven Kallenbach, 54, of Stoddard and John Bruring, 47, of La Crosse were charged Jan. 27 in Jefferson County Court with felony possession of illegal fish after a lengthy investigation by the Department of Natural Resources into a large number of dead fish found along the shore of Lake Koshkonong on Sept. 28, 2010.

Kallenbach and Bruring face jail time and fines of up to \$10,000 for the charges. They're scheduled for an initial appearance Feb. 21 in Jefferson County Court.

Investigators linked the fish kill to a Sept. 2, 2010, carp and rough fish seine haul during which Kallenbach, Bruring and a fishing crew netted over 120,000 pounds of fish in Olson's Bay, which is off the north shore of Lake Koshkonong, near Oak Lawn Academy.

According to the criminal complaint, Kallenbach and Bruring's fishing crew hauled the fish into a holding pen near the shore and then left them in nets in Lake Koshkonong over

night Sept. 2, reportedly killing more than 300 walleyes and more than 300 white bass in the process.

Crews reportedly returned to sort through the fish the next day and realized they'd killed a significant number of game fish. Bruring, Kallenbach and crews reportedly then dug holes along the shore of Lake Koshkonong and buried some of the dead game fish.

Crews also hid the dead fish under concrete riprap, brush and outcroppings along the shoreline, according to the complaint.

“We had so much dead loss, we were afraid of how it would look, so we disposed of them on shore by burying them,” Bruring admitted to investigators in a written statement.

The DNR learned of the fish kill from two informants whose names are being withheld. One of the informants had been fishing with Kallenbach and Bruring on Sept. 2, according to court papers, although it's unclear if the person was part of the fishing crew.

Overall, DNR investigators reported recovering 693 identifiable fish in the kill, with a total value of \$5,643, based on state statute.

DNR game warden Jeremy Plautz, who was involved in the investigation, said he wouldn't speculate on whether more fish might have been killed than were actually identified in the investigation.

Kallenbach and Bruring in 2010 paid the DNR a top bid of \$53,800 for a yearlong contract to remove rough fish, including carp and buffalo, at Lake Koshkonong.

The DNR has contractor fishers remove rough fish to improve water quality and aquatic life. The fishers in turn sell the rough fish to processing plants.

Kallenbach and Bruring also held fishing contracts last year at several other locations along the Rock River, according to DNR records, and have removed rough fish at Lake Koshkonong and other area waters for eight years.

In September 1999, Bruring and Kallenbach reported killing hundreds of carp at Lake Koshkonong during a rough fish removal. At the time, officials blamed low oxygen and high water temperatures for the kill.

It's not clear why the fish died in the Sept. 2 kill.

The DNR terminated Kallenbach and Bruring's Lake Koshkonong contract in October 2010, after officials learned the fishers had filed falsified reports detailing their catch Sept. 2.

According to the DNR, Kallenbach and Bruring had tried to downplay the scope of their kill, reporting that just 18 game fish had died during their Sept. 2 seine haul.

“I did this because it won’t look good in the public’s eye,” Bruring reportedly told investigators. “We did not want this to look badly on us or the (rough fish removal) industry so we could keep fishing.”

Plautz said the DNR’s rough fish removal contract dictates that any netted game fish are to be returned to the water, dead or alive, as soon as fishers discover them.

“They took those fish and buried them up on shore. That’s clearly outside the contract,” Plautz said.

Witnesses had informed the Gazette of the fish kill, and a Gazette photographer on Sept. 28 photographed numerous piles of dead fish lying on the shore of Lake Koshkonong near a boat launch off Bingham Road and adjacent to Oak Lawn Academy.

DNR officials at the time declined to discuss details about the dead fish but indicated the agency was investigating the incident as a possible fish kill.

Plautz said the DNR has not yet awarded 2011 rough fish removal contracts for area waters, but he said the bid process will start soon.

He said despite the pending charges, he’s unaware of any regulations that would preclude Kallenbach and Bruring from bidding for rough fish removal contracts at Koshkonong or other waters in the state.

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