

Indiana drainage laws are a combination of statutory and common-law theories. They are complex; often a landowner may pursue several remedies at one time.

If a landowner's drainage problem concerns the rights and responsibilities of other neighboring landowners, the landowner should discuss the problem with his neighbor. Both parties may want to consult with attorneys to make sure their rights are adequately represented.

The purpose of this brochure is to provide a checklist for you and your attorney of some of the legal remedies and theories you may want to use in solving a drainage problem. Please share this information with your attorney, who will have access to the statutes and court cases listed herein.

Before undertaking any drainage work, it is important to identify other environmental concerns present. The Indiana Department of Environmental Management, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Army Corp of Engineers and Indiana Department of Natural Resources may also have rules and regulations pertaining to your drainage problem.

### **1. Regulated drains**

A regulated drain is an open drain, a tiled drain or a combination of the two. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-2. If a drain is regulated, "[t]he county surveyor is the technical authority on the construction, reconstruction, and maintenance" of the existing or proposed drain and should be able to inform you of the status of the drain. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-29.

The county surveyor classifies all regulated drains in the county as: drains in need of reconstruction, drains in need of periodic maintenance or drains that are to be vacated. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-34(a). Landowners may make a request to the county drainage board to classify or reclassify a drain affecting their land, provided at least 10 percent of the landowners make the request. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-35(c). The county surveyor will then submit a classification report to the board. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-35(a).

Upon approval of the classification report a long-range plan will be created by the surveyor. This plan will also be submitted to the board for approval. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-36(a). Landowners affected by a regulated drain can request the board to advance the date of referral to the surveyor for a

report, provided at least 10 percent of the owners make the request. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-36(d).

The drainage code provides a procedure for the board to act on the surveyor's maintenance and reconstruction reports, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article.

When a regulated drain is "obstructed or damaged by logs, trees, brush, unauthorized structures, trash, debris, excavating, filling, or pasturing livestock, or in any other way, the county surveyor shall immediately remove the obstruction and repair any damage." Ind. Code § 36-9-27-46.

If damage or an obstruction is caused by an owner of land, or by a person who enters upon the land under any contract, easement or statute, the surveyor can either require that person to remedy the problem or recover damages from him. Ind. Code §§ 36-9-27-46 and 47.

### **2. Establishment of a new regulated drain**

If a drain cannot be established in the best and cheapest manner without affecting land owned by other persons, then you may want to consider establishing a new regulated drain. Ind. Code §§ 36-9-27-54 through 66 explains the procedure for establishing new regulated drains.

Ind. Code § 36-9-27-62 establishes a procedure for a county drainage board to assess the benefits and damages to a landowner affected by the establishment of a new regulated drain.

### **3. Obstruction of mutual drain or watercourse**

*Mutual drains* are established to drain two or more tracts of land under different ownership. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-2. A *natural surface watercourse* is an area of ground surface over which precipitation occasionally and temporarily flows in a definable direction and channel. Ind. Code § 36-9-27.4-3.

A person may file a petition with the county drainage board seeking removal of an obstruction from a mutual drain, natural surface watercourse, or stream located outside the person's property. Ind. Code § 36-9-27.4-9. The petition must include a general description of: (1) the tract of land owned by the petitioner, (2) explanation of the need for

removal, which explains how removal of the obstruction will promote better drainage or alleviate an adverse effect from the obstruction on the petitioners land, and (3) the site of the obstruction. Ind. Code § 36-9-27.4-10. The county surveyor will investigate the petition; upon finding an obstruction, the drainage board will hold a hearing to determine if removal requirements exist. Ind. Code §§ 36-9-27.4-12 through 14.

### **4. Increased flowage in a watercourse**

An upper landowner may construct ditches and channels on his land to carry and drain surface water to an existing watercourse. However, he may not change the course of the water, or collect or concentrate the surface water and cast it on the lands of the lower owner, causing damage. Glick v. Marion Const. Corp., 331 N.E.2d 26, 31 (Ind. App. 1975).

Similarly, a lower landowner may not cause water to back up onto the property of an upper landowner. Gasway v. Lalen, 526 N.E.2d 1199, 1201 (Ind. App. 1988).

### **5. Surface water and the common enemy rule**

If surface water is causing the drainage problem, Indiana's controversial "common enemy rule" may apply. First you must determine whether the water in question is diffused surface water.

Surface water includes water from falling rains or melting snows, diffused over the surface of the ground or flowing temporarily upon or over the surface which has no definite banks or channel. Trowbridge v. Torabi, 693 N.E.2d 622, 626-627 (Ind. App. 1998) (quoting Capes v. Barger, 109 N.E.2d 725, 726 (Ind. App. 1953)).

The common enemy rule states, "surface water which does not flow in defined channels is a common enemy and...each landowner may deal with it in such manner as best suits his own convenience. Such sanctioned dealings include walling it out, walling it in and diverting or accelerating its flow by any means whatever." Argvelan v. Haviland, 435 N.E.2d 973, 975 (Ind. 1982). Under this rule, you may "accelerate or increase the flow of surface water by limiting or

eliminating ground absorption or changing the grade of the land." Argvelan, 435 N.E.2d at 976.

### **6. Limitations to the common enemy rule**

If a neighbor is diverting surface water onto your land you should study the limitations to the common enemy rule. Importantly, this rule only applies to landowners making improvements to their own land, not upon a neighbor's land. Harlan Bakeries, Inc. v. Muncy, 835 N.E.2d 1018, 1033 (Ind. App. 2005).

The Indiana Supreme Court has also recognized an exception to the common enemy rule: "one may not collect or concentrate surface water and cast it, in a body, upon his neighbor." Argvelan, 435 N.E.2d at 976. The court also noted that "malicious or wanton employment of one's drainage rights" would likely be impermissible as well. Id.

### **7. Criticism of the common enemy rule**

The common enemy rule has come under some criticism. In Rounds v. Hoelscher, 428 N.E.2d 1308 (Ind. App. 1981), the court attempted to adopt the "reasonable use rule" rather than the "antiquated" common enemy rule. Id. at 1315. Justice Hunter's dissenting opinion in Argvelan, 435 N.E.2d at 978 and dissent to the denial of transfer in Gilmer v. Board of Comm'r of Marshall County, 439 N.E.2d 1355 (Ind. 1982) also advocate the reasonable use rule, which is used in other jurisdictions.

However, the Indiana Supreme Court rejected this new rule and reaffirmed the use of the common enemy doctrine in Argvelan, 435 N.E.2d at 977.

### **8. Nuisance action**

The common enemy rule is often used as an affirmative defense to a nuisance action. Ind. Code § 32-30-6-6 defines a nuisance as "Whatever is: (1) injurious to health; (2) indecent; (3) offensive to the senses; or (4) an obstruction to the free use of property; so as essentially to interfere with the comfortable enjoyment of life or property."

Nuisance has generally been applied only to ponds and natural watercourses. However, in Luhnow v. Horn, 760 N.E.2d 621 (Ind. App. 2001),

the court noted that the surface water common enemy rule could be used “regardless of... whether the plaintiff asserts his claims as an action or negligence, trespass, or nuisance.” Luhnnow, 760 N.E.2d at 631.

### **9. Artificial impoundments of water**

A landowner who creates an artificial impoundment of water on his land will be liable to his neighbor if he permits it to escape and the neighbor is thereby injured. Gumz v. Bejes, 321 N.E.2d 851, 856 (Ind. App. 1975).

### **10. Drainage easement by written contract**

If a tiled or open drain in need of repair serves your farm and neighboring land, you may want to check the recorder’s office to see if an written drainage easement or covenant exists; this could assign responsibility for drain maintenance.

A covenant that imposes an affirmative burden may run with the land and bind successors if:

- (1) The original covenantors intend it to run,
- (2) The covenant touches and concerns the land
- (3) There is privity of estate between subsequent grantees of the original covenantor and covenantee.

Moseley v. Bishop, 470 N.E.2d 773, 776 (Ind. App. 1984).

### **11. Drainage easement by implication**

If a common owner of your land and your neighbor’s land established a drain, you may have an implied drainage easement. This might give you the right to maintain the drain located on the neighbor’s property.

In order for there to be a drainage easement implied by law, the servitude must be “(1) obvious, (2) permanent, (3) in use at the time the ownership in the land is severed, and (4) reasonably necessary... not merely convenient or beneficial.” Hartwig v. Brademas, 424 N.E.2d 122, 124 (Ind. App. 1981).

### **12. Drainage easement by prescription**

It is also possible to acquire a drainage easement by prescription. Powell v. Dawson, 469 N.E.2d 1179, 1181 (Ind. App. 1984).

“A prescriptive easement is established by actual, open, notorious, continuous, uninterrupted, adverse use for twenty years [Ind. Code § 32-23-1-1] under claim of right, or by continuous adverse use with knowledge and acquiescence of the servient owner.” Powell, 469 N.E.2d at 1181.

### **13. Drainage across railroads**

Railroads sometimes present drainage problems for adjoining landowners. The general powers of railroad corporations include:

To construct its road upon or across any stream of water, watercourse, highway, railroad, or canal, so as not to interfere with the free use of the same, which the route of its road shall intersect, in such manner as to afford security for life and property; but the corporation shall restore the stream or watercourse, road, or highway thus intersected to its former state, or in a sufficient manner not to unnecessarily impair its usefulness or injure its franchises. Ind. Code § 8-4-1-14(a)(5).

This section provides an action against a railroad for obstructing or damaging a drainage ditch or watercourse. See also, West Ind. Code Ann. § 8-4-1-14, notes 181-190.

### **14. Drainage and public roads**

Drainage problems are often caused by poorly maintained and constructed ditches and culverts along and under public roads, which collect and cast water upon adjoining farmland. However, the common enemy rule and its limitations also applies to government entities. The Indiana Supreme Court has stated “[a] public corporation has no more right to collect water in an artificial channel, and cause it to flow upon the land of another in a greatly increased quantity, than has a private land owner.” Patoka Twp. v. Hopkins, 30 N.E. 896 (Ind. 1892).

Further, while a landowner may protect himself from flooding and surface water, when dealing with problems near a public road, he may not divert water in such a way that interferes with the public’s use and enjoyment of the road. Shelbyville & B. Turnpike Co. v. Green, 99 Ind. 205 (1884).

### **15. Indiana Tort Claims Act**

When drainage problems are caused by public roads or regulated drains, concerns over the responsibility of a government entity may arise. Government entities may be liable for the torts committed by its agencies and employees. The Indiana Tort Claims Act grants immunity from tort liability for certain acts and establishes special procedural requirements if negligence or another tort is claimed. Ind. Code §§ 34-13-3-1 through section 25. For example, losses or damages arising from the performance of a discretionary function, authorized entry onto property or temporary conditions caused by weather are protected under the Tort Claims Act.

Although the Tort Claims Act provides blanket immunity from tort liability for losses occurring from authorized entry onto property, due care must be taken to avoid damaging crops, fences and other structures located around a regulated drain. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-33(c).

### **16. Takings of land**

The Indiana Constitution, Article I, section 21, states, “No person’s property shall be taken by law, without just compensation...” Because the Tort Claims Act is limited to tort actions, it does not grant immunity for takings theories. It has been held that a state statute, such as the Tort Claims Act, may not be used to trump constitutional rights. Moore v. Porter County Drainage Board, 578 N.E.2d 380 (Ind. App. 1991).

Generally, the establishment of a regulated drain without compensation does not qualify as an unconstitutional taking of property. Johnson v. Kosciusko County Drainage Bd., 594 N.E.2d 798, 804-05 (Ind. App. 1992). However, in Van Keppel v. Jasper County Drainage Board, 556 N.E.2d 333, 336 (Ind. App. 1990), a landowner suffered damage to his property when the banks of a ditch had to be reconstructed. The court stated that a landowner can use an inverse condemnation action if an interest in land was taken for public use without compensation. If a trial court finds that a taking has occurred, it will appoint an assessor to calculate damages. Id.

a publication of



## **Legal Considerations for Solving Drainage Problems**

By M. Owen Mohler

Revised by Farm Bureau Staff July 2015

*M. Owen Mohler was a former lobbyist and counsel for Indiana Farm Bureau, Inc. Mr. Mohler is deceased.*

225 S. East Street  
P.O. Box 1290  
Indianapolis, IN 46206  
(317) 692-7840  
1-800-866-1160 ext. 7840  
www.infarmbureau.org