

A Look At A Chemical Spill

By **ROBERT DISTEL**
Wayzata Country Club

On June 30, 1992 thousands of Superior, Douglas County, Duluth, Cloquet and Proctor residents were evacuated from their homes due to a chemical spill which originated in Superior, Wisc.

The spill of dangerous Liquid Benzene occurred about 2:30 a.m. from a railroad tank car that fell from an elevated bridge into the Nemadji River, approximately three miles from my home in Superior. It was a little like watching a newscast — an eerie feeling to be awakened by squad cars and rescue units announcing that everyone must evacuate. The town of Superior was basically closed down by noon, including Nemadji Golf Course of which I was, at that time, golf course superintendent. All phone lines were tied up, families frantically trying to contact each other, find their school children, or scramble for one of the few remaining hotel/motel rooms available outside the city.

The Benzene toxin, a component of gasoline, is suspected of causing cancer and is known to cause headaches, difficulty in breathing and loss of consciousness. There were several people admitted to the hospital to be checked out after Benzene-related symptoms, but no fatalities were reported. For the most part everyone remained calm, got their families to safety and spent a free day away from work or school. The threat of danger seemed to be eliminated by 6:00 p.m. that evening when the evacuation was called off and the roadblock on the bridge dividing Superior and Duluth was lifted. All but those who lived in a one-mile radius were allowed to return home. Clean-up of the spill was underway and DNR authorities reported that there would be no danger to aquatic life since the Benzene gas is too light to permeate water, although I did notice several dead fish along the river bank shortly after the spill. The gas, being a carcinogen, may

have a long-term effect on wildlife whose habitat includes the riverbed. I observed an alarming decrease in the return of swallows and martins and noticed that mother birds, bluejays and bluebirds, had left their young baby birds in the nests to die, surely

to escape the irritating gases. Nemadji Golf Course had lost a day's revenue but, moreover, lost some valuable wildlife.

I hope for a return of all that wildlife and a good report of no long-term effects on any life in the Superior area.

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