

Deformed U.S. frogs alarm scientists

Pollutants to blame for horrifying trend, experts suspect

By Beth Silver
ASSOCIATED PRESS

HENDERSON, Minn. — Bruce Nelson was catching frogs for catfish bait last year when he realized something was horribly wrong: Some of the frogs had stumps for legs, and others had as many as four tangled hind legs.

"You see deformed things all the time in nature, but nothing like this," Nelson said.

All across Minnesota, into neighboring Wisconsin and South Dakota and even as far away as Quebec and Vermont, scientists and locals are seeing frogs with tails, grotesquely misshapen limbs, missing or shrunken eyes and smaller sex organs.

In fact, scientists have had a hard time finding wetlands in Minnesota with no deformed frogs.

"It scares me," said Judy Hel-

*S.F. Examiner
10/10/96
pg. A1*

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Anxiety over plague of frog deformities

gen, a research scientist with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. "I'm at different levels of getting a chill down my spine."

Scientists aren't sure what's causing the deformities. The theories run the gamut from pesticides to parasites, ozone depletion to radiation.

Many worry that people are in danger, too.

"There's a reasonable assumption that if there's an external substance influencing amphibian development, it could influence human development," said David Hoppe, who is on a state-financed

team of scientists researching the problem.

So far, little has been discovered. The federal Environmental Protection Agency plans to do its own study.

First reported by students

Students from the Minnesota New Country School in Le Sueur, in the heart of the state's farm country, first reported the deformed leopard frogs during a field trip to a wetland last year.

They told the pollution control agency, then state lawmakers, and finally they went worldwide by putting information and pictures of the frogs on the Internet.

"When somebody caught a frog without one leg," 13-year-old Jack Bovee told a state House commit-

tee this year, "I thought, 'Houston, we have a problem.'"

Cindy Reinitz, the teacher who has become known as "The Frog Lady" since her middle school students made the discovery, said there is at least one person with cancer in every household around the wetland. But scientists have made no direct link between the frog abnormalities and cancer.

A newly created frog hot line has received hundreds of sightings of deformed frogs, from 54 of the state's 87 counties.

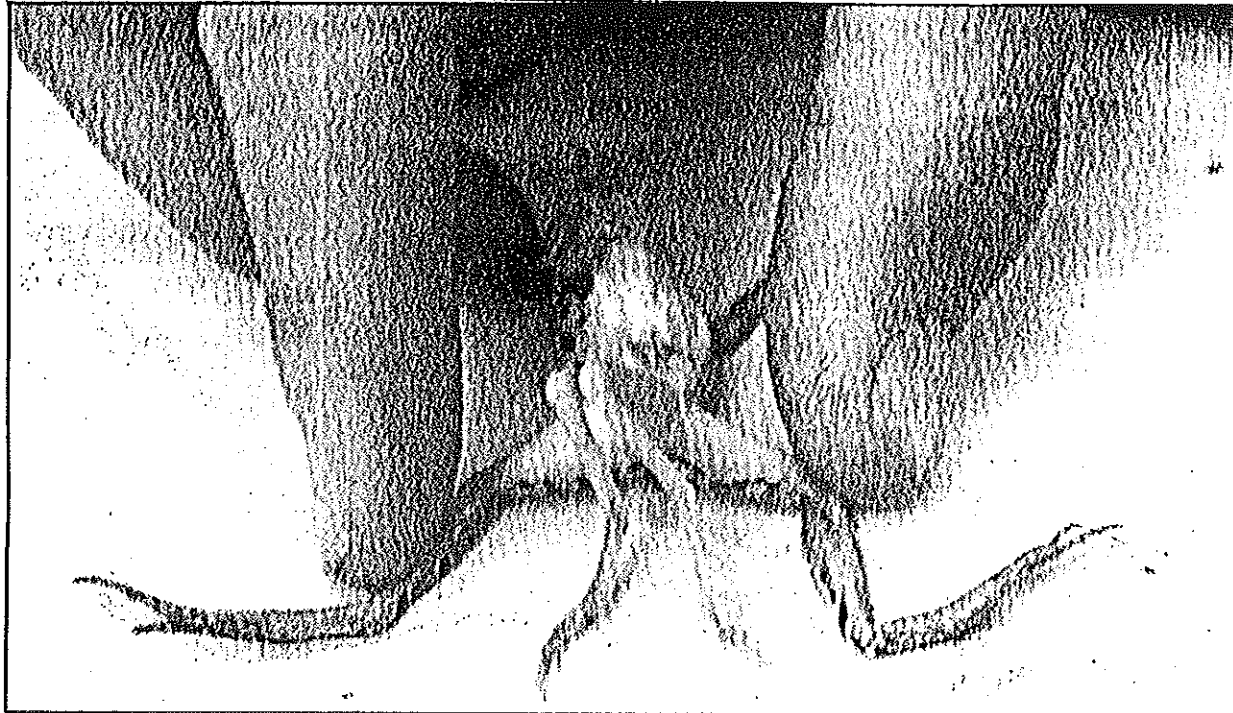
Pollution behind deformities?

The fact that the abnormalities are widespread suggests that the problem has more than one source, said Hoppe, a herpetologist from the University of Minnesota at Morris.

His best guess is some sort of water pollution, possibly from something airborne. That could come from heavy metals, pesticides or a whole array of things that settle onto the landscape.

In examining some 10,000 frogs this summer, Hoppe says, he found that the most aquatic frogs had the worst abnormalities.

"I was very surprised — startled even," he said, "because I've seen a lot of frogs over the years, and I've never seen anything like that."



MINNESOTA POLLUTION CONTROL AGENCY PHOTOS VIA AP

Frogs found throughout North America with two extra hind legs and other deformities are baffling scientists.