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 of some of the legal remedies and theories you may 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, contact your county surveyor on matters regarding construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of the existing or proposed drain. Ind. Code § 36-9-27-29.

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, trenches, defense 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 shall immediately remove the obstruction.” Ind. Code §§ 36-9-27-29 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.

2. Establishment of a new regulated drain

If a drain cannot be established in the best and cheapest manner without affecting surrounding landowners, then you may want to establish 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

If a drain is obstructed or reclassified 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, the surveyor creates a long-range plan. 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).

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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; as it interferes with the enjoyment 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.” Luhnow, 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 a written drainage easement or covenant exists to assign responsibility for drain maintenance.

A covenant that creates an affirmative burden may run with the land and bind successors if: (1) The original covenants intend it to run, (2) The covenant touches and concerns the land, and (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: constructing a road upon or cross a stream of water, watercourse, highway, railroad, or canal but not to interfere with any free use of the same. The corporation shall restore the stream or watercourse, road or highway thus intersected to its former state, or in a sufficient manner that does not impair its usefulness or injure its fringes. Ind. Code § 8-4-1-14(a)(5).

This section provides an action against a railroad for causing or damaging a drainage ditch or watercourse. See also, West Ind. Code Ann. § 8-4-1-14, notes 16-21.

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. The common enemy rule and its limitations also apply 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. Shelbysville & 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.

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, 594 N.E.2d 798, 804-05. 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.