

Hearing on PFAS will shape the future of Wisconsin's drinking water

Written by Wisconsin Conservation Voters, Ryan Billingham
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Conservation group says standard proposed at NRB hearing Wednesday are some of the best chances we have to protect Wisconsinites from these dangerous forever chemicals.

MADISON – On Wednesday, Feb. 23, The Natural Resources Board (NRB) will have an opportunity to address PFAS chemicals in Wisconsin's drinking water.

A growing number of cities and towns across Wisconsin are finding PFAS contamination in their drinking water, and there may be more. Most recently, Wausau reported that all of its municipal wells tested positive for PFAS, forcing public schools there to disable district drinking fountains.

There are no state or federal requirements for testing and cleaning up existing water pollution – Wisconsin communities need drinking water standards for the safety of its communities.

The Natural Resources Board (NRB) will vote tomorrow Wednesday, Feb. 23, on the Evers Administration's PFAS rules, which would create testing requirements and maximum allowable levels of the two most common PFAS compounds. Each of the rules are meant to address one of the three main places PFAS contamination is detected – surface water, groundwater, and drinking water.

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The PFAS threat to our communities is real and growing.

On French Island, heavily contaminated wells have left residents living off of five-gallon water jugs provided by the state and the City of La Crosse.

Nearly half of Eau Claire's wells have been shut down while the city is managing poisoned water by diluting it through manufactured lagoons.

In Peshtigo, Tyco Fire Products kept the community in the dark about PFAS contamination for four years, and residents are just beginning to understand the health-related consequences of the company's inaction.

In Madison, Well 15 approaches its third anniversary of being shut down from PFAS contamination, while nearby residents face warnings against consuming more than one fish per month from Starkweather Creek.

And most recently, Wausau residents learned about contamination across every one of their city wells, and the city is racing to identify solutions.

A brief history of forever (chemicals)

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a group of highly toxic human-made chemicals resistant to heat, water, and oil. PFAS have been linked to a number of negative health effects, including increased cholesterol levels, thyroid disease, high blood pressure, lower infant birth weight, decreased fertility in women, and decreased body response to vaccines.

Used for decades in applications such as cookware, packaging, and firefighting chemicals PFAS are now known to be inundating water supplies here in Wisconsin and across the country. These chemicals are referred to as "forever chemicals" because they do not break

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down naturally in the environment, and can accumulate in the bodies of people and wildlife. Because the lack of standards and testing, we are only now beginning to understand how widespread these toxic chemicals are throughout the state and country.

PFAS have been found in the water supply of more than 10 Wisconsin communities, some of which have had to resort to using bottled water due to dangerously high levels of PFAS. Unfortunately, due to a lack of oversight and testing it's not known just how widespread this problem is, and will become.

Big talk, no (meaningful) action

For years, the GOP-controlled legislature has ignored this problem. Worse, they have taken measures to stop meaningful reform, instead siding with corporate polluters and their allies like Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce (WMC) and the American Chemistry Council (ACC).

Speaker Robin Vos formed a Water Quality Task Force two years ago, spending thousands in resources and tax dollars for a series of public hearings. Despite overwhelming support for reforms and new protections, that task force failed to pass anything meaningful.

And now, more communities like Wausau are paying for that failure with their pocketbooks and health. There remain no state or federal requirements for testing and cleaning up existing water pollution, leaving Wisconsin communities frighteningly vulnerable to serious long-term damage.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) recently held three public hearings on groundwater, surface water, and drinking water to hear from the public about setting standards to protect Wisconsin's water. On Feb. 23, the Natural Resources Board will be voting on whether to pass those standards.

Solutions

These proposed standards are some of the best chances we have to protect Wisconsinites from these dangerous forever chemicals. Our children, our families, and our communities deserve a cleaner future.

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There is no safe level of PFAS in drinking water. Because this is an emerging threat, there are no federal guidelines or protections in place – and no time to waste. Wisconsin must act. It cannot depend on solutions to trickle down while people here are injured.

The Evers Administration has been a fierce advocate for Wisconsin's water. Gov. Tony Evers and Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes have been leading voices in the movement to finally protect Wisconsin communities from these threats, and have drafted rules to protect our water. The administration has also provided \$600,000 in grants to municipalities for testing local water systems for PFAS.

Wisconsin's water has been neglected for far too long. On Wednesday, Feb. 23 the NRB has a duty to protect Wisconsin's communities from this threat.

You can learn more about [PFAS in Wisconsin here](#).