

Immediate Action Needed for Safe Drinking Water in Kewaunee County

Written by Clean Wisconsin

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With sound science and recommendations in hand, it's time to get to work on the county's public health emergency.

MADISON - When it comes to having access to clean, safe drinking water, 19 months is too long to wait. The time to send clean water to those with contaminated drinking water wells in Kewaunee County is now.

In October 2014, Clean Wisconsin and Midwest Environmental Advocates, along with petitioners Environmental Integrity Project, Midwest Environmental Defense Center, Kewaunee CARES and Clean Water Action Council of Northeast Wisconsin, filed an emergency petition to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) seeking immediate relief for county residents. The three requests in that petition were simple and clear: Provide people with clean drinking water, investigate the source of the well water contamination and hold the polluters accountable.

None of these have happened yet. The state's response has been to form work groups and in the coming weeks and months, "the DNR will be reviewing the recommendations of the work groups to develop appropriate plans for implementation, including administrative rule revisions if necessary," Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Secretary Cathy Stepp said in a recent piece in the Green Bay Press-Gazette. And on Thursday, news broke that Gov. Walker and Rep. Joel Kitchens, R-Sturgeon Bay, are pushing the DNR to issue new administrative regulations for large animal operations and other farmers in regards to manure management in geologically sensitive areas like Kewaunee County.

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While we agree that a coordinated effort that offers evidence-based solutions is critical to remedying this issue in the long term, it does not address the immediate needs of Kewaunee County residents; rulemaking is a three-year process, yet Kewaunee County residents are living with unsafe drinking water right now. Our government should implement emergency rulemaking to address the three clear, simple requests made in the 2014 EPA petition.

And the situation is mounting; an initial well study in November showed that 34% of 320 wells tested did not meet health standards for nitrates and E. coli. In addition, state officials announced on Wednesday that 11 of 30 wells have tested positive for salmonella or rotavirus. None of this is new information though; since 2004, well testing in the county has produced similar results. The residents of Kewaunee County have struggled with unsafe drinking water long enough.

On a broader level, Secretary Stepp pointed out the fact that the nitrate levels found in tested Kewaunee County wells are consistent with statewide averages in agricultural areas and areas without sewers, averages that are already above the public health safety standard. The acknowledgement that contaminated, unsafe drinking water is a statewide issue makes the need for solutions even more urgent, in Kewaunee County and beyond.

While EPA has stepped in to require DNR to discontinue some of the more problematic practices on industrial dairy farms, it continues to defer to DNR on issues of groundwater protection. We must be more scrupulous and concerned with what enters our water and how it gets there. However, our elected and appointed leaders have chosen to value limited oversight over due diligence, and “good customer service” over health and safety; for instance, recent actions by the DNR have undermined its ability to take adequate precautions in permitting large dairy facilities. The environmental protections that have safeguarded the health of Wisconsinites for decades are slowly eroding.

It doesn't have to be like this. A clean and vibrant environment sustains a healthy populace that contributes to a burgeoning marketplace. We need our state government to approach our environment — especially our drinking water — as a vital component in growing the economy and protecting its people. And that starts in Kewaunee County, ground zero for this public health emergency and Wisconsin's growing groundwater contamination issues.