

Protect Wisconsin from PFAS

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

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<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/pfas-contamination-test-s450.jpg>



Sen. Smith writes about how chemicals known as Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) are impacting our groundwater. We know that testing is essential to identify PFAS contamination, understand the extent of the issue and act to limit exposure to these harmful chemicals.

BRUNSWICK, WI - Protecting the quality of food we eat, air we breathe and water we drink should be a top priority. It's what we need to survive.

We've seen over time that inadvertent mistakes have been made that threaten access to these essential resources. In some cases, corporate greed poses short-term profits for some and long-term health impacts for all. Without the proper research and intervention, we can face serious consequences for decades—and generations—to come.

Sometimes neither business nor government leaders are aware of environmental dangers for years until patterns of illness or death appear. An example I often reflect on is the near extinction of the American bald eagle. For decades, environmentalists were puzzled at the eagle populations' rapid decline. Then researchers discovered the correlation between the widely-used chemical DDT as a mosquito pesticide and eagles' endangerment.

At the peak of the problem it was rare to even spot an eagle; I know, because I was a child

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when this was happening and got excited any time I saw one of these majestic birds flying overhead. Since Congress banned DDT in 1972, the resurgence of the eagle is one of the most amazing environmental success stories of the last several decades.

This is what's currently happening with Wisconsin's groundwater because of chemicals known as Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS). PFAS are also referred to as "forever chemicals" because they don't break down naturally in the environment and can stay in one's body for long periods of time. These chemicals produced in laboratories are used in products like food wrap, stain resistant carpeting, non-stick pans and water repellent clothing. PFAS are dangerous because they're in so many products and they're hazardous to humans, having been linked to certain cancers, liver damage, decrease in vaccine efficacy and more.

One product specifically highlights the widespread threat of PFAS: firefighting foam. As effective as the foam is in controlling a fire, it was found to be just as effective at contaminating our groundwater. After a fire incident, the foam was just washed off a road or airport runway entering into the ground. Eventually it was bound to end up in the groundwater. With approximately 97% of Wisconsin communities (equaling 70% of the state's population) dependent on groundwater for their water supply, this really is an alarming situation that we cannot ignore. It won't go away on its own.

Groundwater testing is essential to identify PFAS contamination, understand the extent of the issue and act to limit exposure to these harmful chemicals. Some communities have tested and found their wells to be contaminated; they've started taking action.



I had the opportunity to tour the wells in the City of Eau Claire where they found PFAS in seven of their sixteen wells last year. They knew they couldn't wait for politicians in Madison to fix the problem, so they implemented an impressive solution on their own. Eau Claire acted

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quickly and efficiently, but it will take serious action at the state and national level for the risk of PFAS to dissipate.

The federal government does not set groundwater standards—this happens at the state level. Wisconsin has fallen behind our neighbors in Minnesota and Michigan; they have already begun widespread testing. In 1983, Wisconsin led the nation in groundwater protection by passing the Comprehensive Groundwater Protection Act, which remains widely supported to this day. Since then it has been used to set groundwater standards for 138 chemicals in Wisconsin—but PFAS isn't one of them.

Just last week, the Department of Natural Resources held a public hearing about proposed rules to implement groundwater standards for PFAS. Since declaring 2019 the “Year of Clean Drinking Water,” Governor Evers’ Administration has been hard at work to ensure Wisconsinites have safe, clean drinking water now and forever. Although the public hearing passed, continue to pay attention and advocate for stronger water protections. It’s up to us to ensure our children can live in a state where they don’t simply survive, but thrive.