http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/road-wi-flood-washout-s5.jpg



Changing laws regarding wetlands cannot be done swiftly. The impact of eliminating nature's "natural sponge" can be devastating when severe weather brings heavy rains. Flooding in Huston TX was more severe because much of its wetlands were removed. These critical issues need careful deliberation and engaged citizen discussion.

MADISON - Last Friday afternoon we learned of the 79 bills up for a vote on Tuesday. I spoke with my neighbor shortly after seeing the long list.

"How can they possibly know what they are voting on?" she asked me. I replied there is no time to talk with people and learn the effects of these changes.

Legislation moving quickly through the process makes changes to protections of our wetlands; specifically, wet areas not connected to a navigable body of water.

Wisconsin has more than one million acres of "isolated" wetlands. These areas are our swamps, meadows and marshes. Isolated wetlands are regulated by the state, hence the ability of state lawmakers to remove protections.

Talking to scientists and engineers is key to understanding the importance of wetlands and the implications of removing state protections. However, legislation moving at warp speed with little public notice make it nearly impossible to have these conversations.

Wetlands are key to our ecology. They provide habitat to an immense array of creatures and plants. Wetlands recharge ground water, help control erosion, and store excess water caused by severe weather.

Our farmstead sits 50’ above a large swamp and marsh. The wetlands capture flooding waters from the swollen Buffalo River. In the past several years, we saw several serious floods. The flooding in our wetlands eased possible destruction by the unusually intense storms.

“In the last six years, Wisconsin has seen five 100-year floods and one 1,000-year flood,” wrote Tyler Esh, the Eau Claire Emergency Management Coordinator. “Rains are becoming increasingly severe.”

These severe floods led many people I represent to question current state policies. For example, a town official asked for help with a washed-out road. He wanted to double the size of a culvert that washed out in a severe storm. We could not get adequate state help to pay for the improvements. The following year, the road and culvert washed out again.

Floods know no boundaries. Folks in Racine, Kenosha and Walworth counties remember last summer flooding when up to 8 inches of rain fell causing sewers to overflow. Filling in wetlands makes things worse in urban as well as rural areas.

The City of Houston learned a hard lesson this summer. Part of the reason Houston flooded so badly was because they took out wetlands and built on the low land. In one of several similar stories I read, reporters for Quartz Media wrote,

“Even after it became a widely accepted scientific fact that wetlands can soak up large amounts of flood water, the city continued to pave over them… From 1992 to 2010, this area lost more than 70% of its wetlands, according to research by Texas A&M University…The city, the largest in the US with no zoning laws, is a case study in limiting government regulations and favoring growth – often at the expense of the environment. As water swamps many of its neighborhoods, it’s now a cautionary tale of sidelining science and plain common sense.”

Too often speed and secrecy in the legislative process replaces thoughtful, public discussion. Maybe lawmakers should ask homeowners still recovering from the floods if removing wetland protections is in the public's best interest.

Lawmakers swore an oath to protect the Constitution including to promote the general welfare. In our age of climate change and very unpredictable weather patterns, leaders have a responsibility to protect citizens from the damaging effects of severe weather. Wetlands – nature's "natural sponge" – are part of the answer to protecting us from flooding.

Instead of removing Wisconsin's isolated wetlands protections, we should develop new strategies to cope with changing weather patterns that threaten us. Emergency funds and disaster programs should be changed to address the breadth of problems created by floods. Transportation plans should provide for increased water volume.

The legislative process is designed to force deliberation necessary to thoroughly examine any given issue. Careful consideration seems impossible with legislation speeding through the process. For example, at 9:44 a.m. on Monday we received the Assembly Session calendar for Tuesday. This is the first opportunity the public and press have to review the list of 93 bills up for final passage.

Such critical issues as protecting our precious wetlands need a thoughtful, informed and citizen engaged discussion.