

What Can We Do to Protect Our Water?

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Wednesday, 18 April 2018 06:12 - Last Updated Tuesday, 17 April 2018 17:03

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Many Wisconsinites are concerned about our natural resources and particularly water, and a recent audit that focused on DNR enforcement of water quality found we are not doing enough.

MADISON - "What can we do to protect our water?" This is a question I am often asked. Many Wisconsin residents are concerned about protecting our precious natural resources, and much of the concern is focused on water quality.

This week we celebrate Earth Day. Forty-eight years ago, Wisconsin's own Gaylord Nelson first gathered with 20 million Americans in support of environmental issues. Celebrating the earth means being mindful stewards of all its natural resources, including water. Over 70% of the earth's surface is covered in water. Less than 3% of this water is fresh; most fresh water is tied up in ice. Scientists estimate somewhere between a half and three-quarters percent of all water on earth is liquid fresh water.

In Wisconsin, we are blessed with many lakes, rivers, streams and aquifers. The Public Trust Doctrine contained in Wisconsin's Constitution designates these waters as belonging to all of us. Our state and federal governments are charged with protecting waters.

At the heart of the state's water quality program is a permitting and inspection system that allows water discharge into our lakes, streams and rivers. Inspections, reporting and enforcement actions impose the laws.

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Two years ago, the Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) found that 94% of the time the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) failed to take necessary action against industries and municipalities, which violates its own enforcement policies.

Auditors found ample evidence of inconsistencies, overlooked reports, and incomplete or missing inspections. For example, less than half of CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation) were inspected twice in five years. In a two-year period, only two out of ten industries were inspected as required.



CAFOs are required to send in annual reports that include any manure spills and required testing. Auditors found almost 98% of the required reports were not electronically recorded as being received. This lack of oversight meant DNR had no way of knowing or tracking problems. Staff said they were too busy to review reports.

While the former DNR Secretary acknowledged staffing was a problem, she made no promises to correct the situation. The most recent budget eliminated the Bureau of Science Services and eliminated 49 fulltime positions.

Wisconsin must invest in DNR staff and scientists to oversee water quality. We must hire back the scientists and inspectors, let them do their work, and allow them to speak freely about their findings.

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