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Recently-introduced legislation, which would change Wisconsin's current livestock siting standards, serves as an important reminder why legislators must listen to constituents and stakeholders when developing new policy says Sen. Smith.

MADISON - Before a bill becomes a law, a process exists to ensure policymakers develop the most effective policy proposal, and with good reason. Decisions made on the state level influence the way folks work and live in all corners of the state. Legislation should be a product of the conversations policymakers have with the stakeholders who will be impacted.

But that's not what happened when Republicans introduced Senate Bill (SB) 808, a bill which would rewrite livestock siting and expansion standards in Wisconsin. When making significant policy changes, the safety and health of individuals involved must be our first priority. Rather than create hastily-made policy, we need to think critically and develop well-informed policy that will assure Wisconsin's a better place for all.

In 2003, the State Legislature passed the Livestock Siting Law, which gave the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) the ability to create standards for local governments regarding the location and expansion of livestock operations which have more than 500 animal units, according to the Wisconsin Farm Bureau.

Before legislation was passed, town boards and their constituents wanted an opportunity to voice their thoughts on growing livestock facilities. These standards were created to ensure neighboring properties were protected from the negative consequences of expanding facilities. For example, a farm wanting to expand from 400 to 4,000 cows would have more manure, which will spread and eventually affect the groundwater.

Livestock siting isn't a simple process or law. After all, livestock siting affects Wisconsin's agricultural practices, our environment and public health. When legislators introduced a new bill regarding livestock siting rules, there were many concerns over the changes it would make. Considering the proposed changes SB 808 would have on current livestock siting laws, many of us were shocked with how fast it moved through the legislative process.

Typically, the legislative process for a bill to become a law takes months from the time a legislator drafts the bill, talks through the proposal with subject experts and stakeholders, introduces the bill to the Legislature, has a public hearing and committee vote, passes both houses and is signed by the Governor. The length of this process is imperative for experts and constituents to provide input.

In just under 9 days, Republicans introduced the bill and scheduled the bill for a vote in the Senate and Assembly. The way in which this bill sprinted through the legislative process with very little scrutiny took my breath away. The bill authors skipped consultation with subject experts or professionals at DATCP and the Department of Natural Resources when moving this bill forward. Why wouldn't you work alongside the two agencies responsible for administering this law?

Although The Livestock Siting Law certainly could use updating, SB 808 went too far. If passed, SB 808 would move siting approval from local governments to DATCP, essentially stripping away local control while eliminating public input on the CAFO permitting process, which threatens our clean drinking water.

SB 808 would also create the Livestock Facility Technical Review Board, a new DATCP board, operating separately from the already established Livestock Facility Siting Review Board. Questions are still unanswered as to the new board's role and purview, the rulemaking process or the public's role on the board.

Wednesday, 26 February 2020 15:36 - Last Updated Wednesday, 26 February 2020 15:51

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