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Rep. Sargent: DNR Audit Underlines Consequences of Starving State Government

DNR underfunding, understaffing causing lack of enforcement, accountability

(MADISON) – Today the Joint Legislative Audit Committee had a hearing about the results of the Legislative Audit Bureau’s (LAB) 2016 audit of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Wastewater Permitting and Enforcement program.

“This audit reveals the consequences of starving our state government,” said Representative Melissa Sargent (D-Madison), ranking Democratic member of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee.

“This is what happens when the Governor prioritizes pollution over sustainability and the Department Secretary not-so-surprisingly requests to cut twenty-five fewer employees over the last six years, pays her staff less than the maximum, and rolls back oversight to benefit corporate special interests. Our DNR is anemic because it’s so severely underfunded and understaffed.”

The Wisconsin Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (WPDES) is a permit program for the regulation and enforcement of pollutant discharge in surface water and groundwater from municipal wastewater treatment plants, industrial wastewater treatment facilities, and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). The LAB’s audit of the WPDES program showed the DNR took no action on 94% of pollution violations, and more than half of CAFOs were only inspected once or less in a five-year period.

“There are literally not enough people to actually enforce the laws on pollution and contamination--the Governor and DNR Secretary have made sure of it. They’re expecting polluters and CAFOs to self-regulate their own contamination and pollution and then they act surprised when they discover that polluters aren’t complying with state law and regulations.

“This audit reveals the impacts of repeated attacks, cuts, and the hard work of special interests who’d rather increase their own profits than protect and conserve our natural resources. It’s disgraceful, but it’s certainly not surprising.”

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Melissa Sargent is a State Representative in the Wisconsin State Assembly, representing the 48th Assembly District, which covers the east and north sides of the City of Madison and the village of Maple Bluff.