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Please Get the Facts Straight About Water Quality

As a former newspaper editor, I believe that it is of utmost importance to the integrity of the institution of a free press to report on statistical findings as apolitically as possible. It is because of this belief that I am extremely disappointed about the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel excluding some very important facts from an article about the state of water quality published on Friday.

On Friday at 12:38 PM, an article was published on JS Online entitled "Study: 32 of 35 wells in rural southwestern Wisconsin had fecal contamination". This was in regards to the Southwest Wisconsin Groundwater and Geology (SWIGG) study report that was released earlier in the week. In the SWIGG study report, the 32 of 35 wells that had been tested: "...were randomly selected from the group of wells previously tested and found to be positive for coliform bacteria or had nitrate above the health threshold of 10 ppm", and not random wells around Southwestern Wisconsin. The role of this report was to determine where exactly these sources of fecal pollution were coming from, and not the scale of the contamination. However, the opening portion of the article states that: "...a new study of private wells in southwestern Wisconsin found that the overwhelming majority were contaminated with fecal matter" and "Results...showed that 32 of 35 wells- or 91% - contained fecal matter from humans or livestock".

This article was subsequently picked up by the Associated Press, the Chicago Tribune, and many local news reporting agencies, after my office contacted the Journal Sentinel to notify them of their mistake. The Chicago Tribune even had the audacity to politicize the bipartisan Water Quality Task Force and paint the work that both sides have been doing as one-sided.

As the chair of the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality and someone who represents the area where this study took place, I share the frustration of all of my constituents who are looking for a solution. Clean water should be nonpartisan and apolitical, and it is my utmost desire for it to be that way. Unfortunately, this omission has had the effect of a widespread attempt to sow seeds of disillusionment and political polarization. I hope that moving forward, the Journal Sentinel and its affiliated papers shy away from this. Water isn't political- let's keep it that way.

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