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Proposed manure management rule changes a positive step for Kewaunee County

NR 151 rule changes a good start, but more work needed to ensure clean water

MADISON, WI—Changes to the manure runoff management rules under NR 151 are a positive step, in the wake of Tuesday’s announcement of the public comment period by the Department of Natural Resources, but stronger rules are needed to fulfill the state’s promise of clean water for the people of Kewaunee County, where groundwater contamination stemming predominantly from agriculture has polluted drinking water.

“These rules are a good start, but this won’t solve the problem of groundwater contamination in Kewaunee County,” said Clean Wisconsin’s Water Program Director Scott Laeser. “We need more stringent spreading requirements on the shallowest, most vulnerable soils and more resources for farmers and counties to work together to implement these new rules quickly and effectively.”

Kewaunee County’s drinking water crisis has gone on for years. Recent studies have found that the gravity of the crisis is far worse than previously understood: sixty percent of wells tested were contaminated with dangerous pathogens, nearly doubling the tally from previous studies. The region’s geology makes it vulnerable to groundwater contamination from manure spreading on the landscape.

“Access to clean, safe drinking water in Wisconsin is every citizen’s right,” said Laeser. “These rule changes start the process of fulfilling that promise, but more is needed to ensure that everyone in Kewaunee County has water free from contamination.”

Citizens across the state are encouraged to write to the DNR during the comment period about the importance of these rules and the need to strengthen them. Attending and speaking at the hearings scheduled for September 11th in Madison, Green Bay, and Eau Claire is also a great way for citizens to make their voices heard.

These rule changes come after years of work from Clean Wisconsin to encourage the DNR and US EPA to solve Kewaunee County’s groundwater issues. In 2014, Clean Wisconsin, along with Midwest Environmental Advocates, filed a Safe Drinking Water Act petition with the US EPA asking for help for Kewaunee County residents. While these rule changes mark the first major attempt from the DNR to directly address the factors contributing to Kewaunee’s drinking water crisis, they do not apply to other areas in Wisconsin that see contaminated groundwater.

“We hope these rule changes will start to show results for Kewaunee County, but we know this is only the starting point,” said Laeser. “Other parts of the state are still vulnerable to groundwater contamination. For now, the state and the agricultural community must use existing tools to reduce the risk of groundwater contamination in Southwest Wisconsin, but the state must prevent another drinking water crisis like the one facing residents in Northeast Wisconsin from happening elsewhere in the state.”

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*On behalf of its more than 30,000 members, supporters and its coalition partners,
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