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Citizens Respond to Reorganization of DNR

Out of a sense of urgency, a coalition of grassroots groups from around the state is responding to WI Department of Natural Resources Secretary Cathy Stepp's announcement of sweeping changes within the agency. Among the management changes, private consultants will become the sole drafters of water pollution permits (WPDES) for large scale animal operations (CAFOs).

Stepp's business plan is no surprise. Back in 2013, then DNR Deputy Secretary Matt Maroney publicly stated, "DNR is no longer a strong advocate one way or another on environmental issues."

One year later, "massive regulatory failure" was identified by a state administrative law judge listening to citizens of Kewaunee County who brought their stories of water and soil contamination into the courtroom.

Kriss Marion of Green County Defending our Farmland believes that privatization of permits could further lead to more legal challenges.

"I fear that citizens will bear even higher legal fees challenging permits that fail to adequately protect groundwater," says Marion.

In June of this year, Wisconsin's Legislative Audit Bureau, a non-partisan body, released its report on WDNR's pollution permits. The report showed how the agency is failing to comply with the Clean Water Act. Further, inspections of industrialized livestock operations are woefully lax and often replaced by self-monitoring. Environmental enforcement activity is nearly non-existent.

"Our water is now being violated by industrial polluters with abandon, and the consequences are disastrous for rural communities," stated Mary Dougherty, president of Sustain Rural Wisconsin Network. "Citizens have little confidence that this latest reshuffling of field and paperwork will result in any significant advance in critical monitoring and enforcement."

Edie Ehlert of Crawford Stewardship Project (CSP) remembers when individual WPDES permits were written to address land characteristics specific to the proposed site.

"The generic permit was endorsed in the name of efficiency," says Ehlert. "Private contractors know their real clients are the CAFO owners, not the people."

Bob Clarke who speaks for Friends of the Central Sands, Waushara County, is also skeptical about how efficiency will benefit anyone other than industrial ag operations.

"After our current administration dismissed most of the DNR's expert scientists, we now see critical protections being placed into private hands," Clarke stated. "The cornerstone for precautionary decisions rests in valid science. In the end, the business of industry, not scientific facts, will guarantee permit issuance."

Tressie Kamp, attorney for Midwest Environmental Advocates (MEA), a non-profit environmental law center, answers calls regularly from alarmed citizens whose well water now tests unsafe for drinking and bathing.

“Clean water requires a healthy government. The WDNR must step up to proactively address the urgency of preventing widespread contamination of the peoples’ groundwater,” said Attorney Kamp.

Elaine Swanson of People Empowered Protect the Land (PEPL) of Rosendale believes it will be the people themselves who will bring back the land ethic.

“DNR’s authority and responsibility are severely compromised. The Clean Water Act violated. The rights of water itself abandoned,” says Swanson. “I have no faith that more time in the field by DNR officials will bring about more protection for the land. Watchdogging is now on us.”

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Sustain Rural Wisconsin Network (SRWN) is a statewide coalition of rural communities dedicated to protecting the economic, social, and cultural vitality of rural communities, as well as the land, air, and water we depend on for happy, healthy lives.