

Part Three: Water is Precious

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 20 February 2019 15:16 -

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Third of three columns describing the importance of water in Wisconsin. Conserving water by limiting high capacity wells, preventing the destruction of wetlands and reinvesting in science at the DNR are easy ways we can keep drinking water clean.

MADISON, WI - Water is cheap. Fixing water quality problems is expensive. Protecting our water before polluting it is less expensive. We can take steps now to preserve our cheapest most precious resource. Changing our perceptions about water use, using nature to help us preserve water and reinvesting in science are easy ways to show how an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

In the last two columns, I discussed how water sustains our lives and how important it is for our economic prosperity. This week I will offer simple, but critical ways we can invest in water, our most precious resource.

Most of Wisconsin is lucky to have immediate access to clean water whether it's from our private wells or from our municipal water utilities. Because water is cheap, most people don't think about conserving it. Think about that. Something must be done differently to motivate people to conserve water even when capacity is not threatened. Where there are private wells there is more awareness of conserving simply because the owner is the manager.



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Privately owned high capacity wells play a big role for Wisconsin's water conservation. Each high capacity well can pump up to 70 gallons of water per minute, or up to 100,000 gallons per day. High concentrations of high capacity wells in a single aquifer can cause serious problems for our drinking water. As water levels drop from overuse, oxygen can breakdown sulfides and expose arsenic to be leached into the water table. Unassuming landowners with private wells are at risk of polluted drinking water if we don't take a hard look at conservation when considering new high capacity well permits.

We can invest in nature as our defender against contaminated water. Wetlands are nature's best water filters. In 1985 Wisconsin completed a wetland inventory and found 5.3 million acres of wetlands left in Wisconsin. Sounds like a lot, right? Well, based on an evaluation of wet soils, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) estimated Wisconsin was home to approximately 10 million acres of wetlands at one time. As of 1985, we lost 47% of our wetlands.

Properties with wetlands tend to be priced below market value and have always been an easy target for farmers and developers. Farmers learned quickly that wetlands were essential to preserving productive soils. Business developers have been slower to learn.

Wetland mitigation allows developers to create new wetlands or rehabilitate existing wetlands if damage to naturally-occurring wetlands is "unavoidable." Wetlands form from necessity. They are nature's way of storing water and preventing flooding.

In recent years, floodwaters have ripped through our western Wisconsin coulees causing incredible damage to homes, businesses, roads and bridges. Floods churn up contaminated sediments and sweep them into our surface waters and eventually into our groundwater too. Protecting and enhancing wetlands is one of the easiest things we can do today to keep our water clean and lessen the damage from powerful floods.



We need to reinvest in science too. Wisconsin's DNR scientists have been under attack for the last 8 years. In 2011, Act 10 forced a mass exodus of scientists and other dedicated public servants from state government. Former Governor Scott Walker sent 57 pink slips to DNR employees on Earth Day 2015, of all days. In the 2017-19 budget, Republicans cut 43 more positions and eliminated the Division of Science Services during a "reorganization" of the

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agency. All mentions of climate change were scrubbed from DNR publications.

Thankfully, Governor Tony Evers and his new pick for DNR, Secretary Preston Cole are choosing science over ignorance. Sec. Preston Cole's comment that the DNR will "double down on science in natural resources management" should be a refreshing assurance for Wisconsin. Governor Evers' recent announcement to help local governments with \$40 million to replace lead services lines is another example of his new approach to protecting the public's water.

As we start to reinvest in our state's ability to keep water clean, I'll need your help. It'll take all of us to educate our neighbors, family and friends about new efforts to keep Wisconsin's water clean. Water may be cheap, but if we lose sight of how precious it is, we will pay far more in the long run.