http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/frac_sand-420x280.jpg

Sen. Vinehout shares the problems some Trempealeau County residents had to deal with after a sand mine and processing plant began using an old agriculture high capacity well as its water source. They clearly demonstrate the need to balance the impact on everyone when considering changes to high capacity well laws.

LINCOLN TOWNSHIP, WI - “I feel like the state failed to protect the people,” Stacy told me. “Nobody really cares because it’s not affecting them.”

Stacy is one of several Lincoln Township residents in Trempealeau County who lived through two years of well problems. An industrial sand mine and processing plant set up shop in the neighborhood.

Mine owners wanted to avoid county zoning rules. The owners negotiated with the cities of Whitehall and Independence – some say pitting one city against the other – to annex the mine into Whitehall and the processing plant into Independence.

The residents of Lincoln Township were left out. They had no voice in the rules placed on the mine and processing plant by the City Councils.

The mine negotiated with Whitehall to provide water for sand processing. Industrial sand mine processing is a very water intensive process. The city’s pipes were unable to handle the high pressure needed to pump water miles away to the mine. Residents told me the city tried to drill a well just for the mine but couldn’t find water.

The mine needed water to operate. Locals said the mine made a deal to use an old nearby agriculture irrigation high capacity well to supply water to the sand processing plant.

Water use escalated. By 2015, three and a half times the water was removed from the agriculture well compared to 2013. Almost immediately after the mine began operation, residents experienced problems. Neighbor's water pressure dropped dramatically during blasting; a well went dry; water filters normally changed every 30 years had to be changed every two or three months; chicken watering devises clogged with sand; chickens died and heavy metals appeared in drinking water.

As one local county board supervisor told me, "There was a clear connection between well degradation and sand mine activity."

Stacy lives about a half mile from the mine. She sent me photos of her water, which was a murky brownish orange, and photos of her scooping handfuls of sand out of her toilet tank. She has gone through three or four washing machines in the past few years.

But the worst came in January. Stacy lost Apples, her horse. Stacy said, "I took it very bad."

Apples died of liver failure. The horse had heavy metals in his tissues. Stacy told me the metals were "too much for his body. He can't process or get rid of it." Her vet said her water "was the worst water he'd ever seen."

County officials started a well testing program. They contacted the state and asked if conditions of the farm well permit used by the mine were violated. When the county couldn't get answers they called me.

Ironically, the Senate was considering a bill to change high capacity well laws. The bill would have made permanent – unless a court took action – every high capacity well in the state.

During the Senate debate, I asked colleagues to support amendments to review well permits when there is a change in use, i.e. from agriculture to mining; when there is a dramatic increase in the water removed, and when water is piped away from the property. Had these requirements

already been law the locals might still have good wells. The Senate majority voted down all my amendments.

GOP Senators did pass a bill that differed from the bill passed by the Assembly. This means, unless the Assembly comes back to act on the bill, it will die.

The high capacity well law does need to change. Residents in Lincoln Township and across the state are vulnerable.

Mine operations in Stacy's neighborhood are winding down. But local news reports a mine annexed into the nearby City of Blair will soon begin operations. I talked with a Whitehall business owner, Linda Mossman, who worries Blair residents will soon face similar troubles.

She asked me to encourage residents to act now by measuring the depth of wells to document – through video or photos – their foundations and to use the well water-testing program available through the county extension office. For under $30, residents can get a comprehensive water test that usually runs about $100.

"People need to know," Linda told me, "This WILL happen in your neighborhood."