

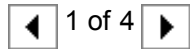
Residents call for stricter, clearer regulation of high-capacity wells

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Mark Spreitzer



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TOWN OF BELOIT—Town of Beloit residents, local policymakers and a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources representative want clearer and/or stricter regulations on high-capacity wells.

At an informational meeting in the town of Beloit about the wells Saturday several residents expressed concerns about a lack of monitoring and regulating and a need for a blanket approval process.

A high-capacity well is defined as a well that pumps 70 gallons of water per minute or more.

The concerns were both new and familiar to Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, and Sen. Janis Ringhand, D-Evansville, who co-hosted the meeting.

“People legitimately have questions about (whether they are) adequately protected, and in some ways they aren't,” said Spreitzer, who is on the Assembly committee on

Natural Resources and Sporting Heritage.

“(The DNR) can only do what the Legislature tells them they can do or what the courts tell them they have to do. Until we give them more guidance as legislators, they are a little bit stuck, and I think that's something we need to do.”

About 50 residents questioned the DNR's approval and regulation practices at the meeting.

Eric Ebersberger, water use section chief for the DNR, explained that the review process for high-capacity wells has seen major changes in regulations since 2004, even more so in the last four years. More are coming, he said.

Oftentimes those regulations and guidelines are strict yet vague, he added.

Before 2004, when an applicant applied for a high-capacity well, the DNR only looked to see if

the deep well would adversely affect the quality of municipal wells within a certain distance. If the answer was no, it was approved.

Stricter reviews of "cumulative effects" on such state waters as lakes, streams, rivers, and surface water, were gradually required after three changes to laws over the last decade.

The most recent changes came in 2011 and 2014 when the DNR was given the authority to see if a deep well would negatively affect other groundwater and private wells within a specified distance outside the property owned by the person applying for the deep well. The measures help ensure that if a deep well is drilled, it wouldn't draw from the same aquifer as private wells and would not affect water quality, Ebersberger said.

The private wells, bodies of water, the water table, geology and aquifers are all used to approve or deny a high-capacity well and design it.

Since most recent changes, the data and information used to approve deep wells has grown, but the decision is still made on a case-by-case basis because the DNR doesn't have a clear definition for what a "significant impact" on nearby wells and bodies of water is, Ebersberger said.

"We need a policy decision by the state," Ebersberger said.

There is current legislation calling for increased and decreased regulation of high-capacity wells.

Saturday's meeting came after a [group of town of Beloit residents](#) living around Sandale Drive had problems with their private wells last summer.

Some wells dried up and the owners spent thousands of dollars in repairs only to find their wells were mechanically sound. They learned the problem was a high-capacity well nearby that was tapping their water source.

An applicant was granted a permit in May by the state Department of Natural Resources for crop irrigation. The owner installed the well in a farm field across Highway 213.

A few days after the well began pumping in July, Lynn Caple's private well ran out of water. Shortly after Caple another neighbor started having problems and a domino effect began.

"Without us talking we wouldn't have known," Caple said.

The high-capacity well and the private wells use different aquifers but the deep well wasn't lined and drew from the private wells' shallower aquifer.

When the well owner stopped pumping water in August, the problems stopped.

The well driller will add a lining, and the high-capacity well will tap a deeper water source, which will hopefully solve the problem, Ebersberger said Saturday.

One resident asked how a well could have been made without a liner and not be checked on.

Ebersberger said the hydrologist made an informed decision, the owner willingly corrected the “unusual” problem. It is the responsibility of the well driller, pump installer and owner to make sure installation is done properly.

An area DNR representative does check a certain percentage of wells to make sure they are running properly, but with “the sheer numbers” of wells they get to as many as possible, Ebersberger said.

All wells do have a meter and well owners are required by law to report their annual consumption. It's unusual for someone to misreport their figures, Ebersberger said in response to a resident who said nothing stops a person from fudging the numbers or taking more water than allowed.

At the end of the meeting, the local representatives, Ebersberger and residents agreed on one thing: There is a lot of work to be done to protect one of Wisconsin's most valuable resources—water.

Spreitzer wants to address several things. The priorities are

- how to provide public notice of a possible high-capacity well coming to an area;
- how residents can report issues;
- how DNR staffing can be addressed with a looming budget cut;
- and how periodic reviews of all wells can be made to ensure they are working as required.

“It was clear residents aren't satisfied with all the answers, and I'm not either,” Spreitzer said. “It's again something only in the last four years the DNR has even been able to look at some of these issues, and we need legislation to clarify some of these things.”