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Bowing to special interests, Republicans fail first PFAS test, putting your health at risk

Madison, WI – With today’s action in committee, GOP members of JCRAR put the interests of polluters and business lobbyists ahead of their constituents’. In rejecting a rule created by the DNR under the authority of the bi-partisan 2019 WI Act 101, which banned the use of certain firefighting foams in specific circumstances, legislative Republicans have failed their first true test in the fight against PFAS in Wisconsin. It was just in the past year that we cleared the lowest possible bar in combating PFAS in our state. Today, Republicans decided to take a step backward and tripped over that bar in the process.

As DNR spokesperson Darsi Foss stated at today’s hearing, what was rejected today was a narrow rule based on a very narrow law. With the standard gutted, we are left with the appearance of preventing pollution without adequately being able to measure if we are making a difference. To put it another way, it’s like removing the smoke detectors from your house because you believe you’d be able to see smoke anyway.

Among the many known harms caused by these “forever chemicals,” which include increased risk of cancer and birth defects, is one that is especially salient in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic: they can actually reduce the effectiveness of vaccines and compromise the immune systems of humans and animals.

While making decisions against the advice of public health experts is nothing new for Wisconsin Republicans, who haven’t passed a bill in over 8 months and have sued to overturn public health initiatives on multiple occasions, these decisions must not be overlooked. Neighbor states, including Minnesota and Michigan, have already begun to regulate PFAS, and it’s time Wisconsin followed suit.

This is not an hypothetical threat. PFAS are here, and have been for some time. Just this week, groundwater near the Madison airport was found to contain amounts thousands of times higher than the recommended EPA limits. In my own Senate district, Mitchell International Airport is among the most contaminated sites in the state. Residents in the Marinette area have had to drink bottled water due to contamination there.

Like lead in paint and water pipes or asbestos in building materials in decades past, the longer we wait to eradicate this problem, the more deadly and financially burdensome it will become. By their actions today, it would appear my Republican colleagues are just fine with that.

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