

Op-Ed: The Path to Cleaner Water

Ensuring our access to clean water has been a priority of mine as a State Senator, and I'm pleased that the legislature is moving forward on the issue.

Early in 2019, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos created the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality. Speaker's task forces usually only involve members of the Assembly, but I reached out to Rep. Vos and at my urging, he agreed to involve both houses of the legislature. I and fifteen of my colleagues from both sides of the aisle came together and travelled across the state, gathering information and seeking solutions.

In early January, we released a package of legislation that will help ensure that we have cleaner water in Wisconsin both today, and in the future. I authored four of the bills that the Task Force introduced, each of which addresses the question of water quality from a different angle.

For people who have contaminated wells, the first and most important step is to remedy the situation so that they can drink and use clean water. That's why I introduced a bill with Representatives Katrina Shankland (D-Stevens Point) and Scott Krug (R-Town of Rome) that invests one million dollars in the state's well compensation program, while also expanding eligibility for that program.

One source of contaminants is failing septic systems. That's why I authored a bill with Sen. Andre Jacque (R-DePere), Rep. Krug, and Rep. Tony Kurtz (Wonewoc) to extend the Private On-Site Wastewater Treatment System (POWTS) program. This program rehabilitates failing septic systems, and helps safeguard our groundwater from waste.

The partnership between modern science and Wisconsin farmers has helped to reduce agricultural contamination, and by properly staffing county conservation offices, we can make even greater strides. I worked with Rep. Todd Novak (R-Dodgeville) and Rep. Rob Brooks on a bill that would invest in these offices so that every county is able to employ three staffers - folks who can take a hands-on approach to helping farmers to implement water resource management plans, cost-share grant administration, and the farmland preservation program.

While modern science has made great strides, there is still more information out there for us to gather and apply. The UW-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources has partnered with the UW-Extension on the Center for Watershed Science and Education. Rep. Shankland, Rep. Krug, and I authored a bill that will help them continue their research and develop a database on private well quality that will help us to better understand and eliminate contaminants. Additionally, the bill creates a matching grant program within the DNR to provide funding for counties to test and map privately owned wells, and funding to assist with further investigation of phosphorous.

By working together, my colleagues and I have come up with bi-partisan proposals so that people across the state have access to clean water now and in the future. That's something that I think we can all support.