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Op-Ed: Clean Water, Smart Stewardship

When we step up to the sink and turn the handle we expect fresh, clean water to come out of the faucet. For the majority of us in Wisconsin, that's the case – but nitrate contamination is effecting the private wells of far too many of our neighbors here in Western and Central Wisconsin. According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS), at least 10% of private wells in the state have nitrate levels that are too high – above 10 parts per million (ppm). I'm working with Rep. Tony Kurtz (Reedsburg), Rep. Scott Krug (Nekoosa), and Sen. Rob Cowles (Green Bay) to help clean up those wells and restore confidence to well-owners in rural Wisconsin.

The four of us have introduced Senate Bill 137, the Health and Wellness Act, and the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy is having a hearing on it this week. Nitrate contamination is a public health risk, so we are proposing the creation of a \$10 million pilot program to be administered by DHS.

Under this legislation, private well-owners living in a county that chooses to participate in the pilot program would be able to contact their local health department to request a nitrate test. The department would then submit a water sample, report the results to DHS and the well-owner, suggest a remediation method if necessary, and then recommend a grant amount. Recipients would be eligible for grants of up to \$2,500. The grant could be used to reimburse the well-owner for testing of the well, to install a filtration system, or to help pay to repair or replace an existing well. Preference would be given to households with a member who is pregnant, breast feeding, has a child under three years old, or occupants over the age of 65.

The battle against water pollution occurs on many fronts, but in the immediate term, it's important to give well owners the tools they need to ensure that they have access to safe, high quality drinking water. This bill is an important step in that direction.