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Bill aimed at helping those with contaminated wells passes Assembly

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The Assembly this afternoon passed a bill to increase grants to people with contaminated wells, over Dem objections that it doesn't go far enough to address issues of groundwater pollution.

Still, bill co-author Rep. Joel Kitchens said the bill wasn't intended to address the "root cause" of the contaminated water.

AB 226 would raise the amount individuals and families with contaminated wells could receive in order to fix, seal, replace or abandon their wells. Currently, a grant awarded under the Department of Natural Resources program can't exceed $9,000. But under the bill, the grant would not be able to exceed $12,000.

A Dem-backed substitute amendment that would require DNR to make rules limiting groundwater pollution failed on a party-line vote, as Dems argued the bill didn't go far enough.

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"It's an emergency if you have to drink water out of a bottle. And if you turn on your tap and see brown water, it's an emergency," said Rep. Gary Hebl, D-Sun Prairie.

But Kitchens, R-Sturgeon Bay said contaminated wells presented a "very very complicated problem" that requires a "multifaceted approach." The bill, he argued, is just one element of that approach.

Kitchens' district includes the dairy-farm intensive Kewaunee County, where residents have long been raising concerns over groundwater pollution. He noted that the DNR has facilitated a round of meetings in the northeastern county, which produced a variety of long term and short term recommendations.

“We’re getting clean water to people right now who need it (with this bill),” he said.

The bill passed the chamber on a voice vote two weeks after a new study on the contamination of private wells in Kewaunee County showed of 131 wells tested, 40 had evidence of bovine manure, 29 had evidence of human wastewater and seven wells registered both.