

GOP leaders OK hiring private attorneys to represent them in two environmental suits

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GOP legislative leaders have approved hiring private attorneys to represent them with Dem Josh Kaul in the AG's office — this time in two environmental suits that are now before the state Supreme Court.

In one, the state Supreme Court agreed to take up a years-long battle over the DNR's decision to allow a Kewaunee County dairy farm to expand to more than 6,000 cows in an area where concerns have been raised over groundwater pollution.

The other deals with the DNR's approval of eight high-capacity wells.

The Joint Committee on Legislative Organization ballot — approved along party lines yesterday — didn't include details of the possible cost to taxpayers for the attorneys. It only stated Committee Co-chairs Roger Roth, the Senate president, and Robin Vos, the Assembly speaker, will "approve all financial costs and terms of representation." Those costs will be split evenly between the two chambers.

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A spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, said Republicans plan to hire Eric McLeod, a partner at the Madison firm Husch Blackwell.

Since Kaul took office, GOP lawmakers have hired private attorneys in three lawsuits challenging actions from the December extraordinary session, as well as a Planned Parenthood suit that is challenging abortion restrictions. A federal judge this week denied the GOP request to intervene in the Planned Parenthood suit,

rejecting Republicans' argument that Kaul wouldn't defend the law strenuously enough.

In those suits, the legal contracts released so far have included rates of \$500 an hour for attorneys.

Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, and Vos, R-Rochester, said they're moving to intervene in the suits, because they involve a ban on state statute enforcing any requirement that is not explicitly permitted in state law.

"We can't afford to go back to an era where overzealous bureaucrats bury the hard-working men and women of the State of Wisconsin with needless government red tape," the GOP leaders said in a statement.

But Senate Minority Jennifer Shilling, D-La Crosse, called the move ridiculous.

"Rather than ensuring every Wisconsinite is able to drink clean water from their tap, Republican leaders want to continue picking petty political fights on the taxpayer's dime," she said.