

Major progress in addressing the wastewater permitting audit

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MADISON- Senator Robert Cowles (R-Green Bay) released the following statement after the Joint Committee on Finance approved Omnibus Motion #143 which, among other things, adopts 2019 Senate Bill 31, authored by Senators Cowles and Patrick Testin (R-Stevens Point) and Representative Scott Krug (R-Nekoosa), and provides for a total of four positions in the Wisconsin Pollution Discharge Elimination System (WPDES) program to address a backlog in the issuance and reissuance of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) wastewater permits, discovered in a 2016 audit of the WPDES program (Audit Report 16-6):

“While I’m happy to see these changes, implementing the recommendations from Audit Report 16-6 should have been an easy lift, but it hasn’t been. Water quality should be a bipartisan issue. Through numerous follow-ups over the past three years as Co-Chair of the Audit Committee, we’ve seen positive changes that have reduced the industrial and municipal permit backlogs. However, despite efforts, the Department of Natural Resources has failed to adequately issue the permits necessary to meet the agricultural permitting backlog goal. Given that the WPDES program is one of our state’s primary tools to protect water quality, this continued backlog is far more than a clerical concern.

“Business owners deal with enough red tape without the added frustration of permits being delayed. The four positions I advocated for in this budget motion will prove to be pivotal in reducing the agricultural permitting backlog. This motion is accomplished without the taxpayers footing the bill through reallocating existing permit revenue to the permitting division and through other segregated accounts. While this motion doesn’t close the book on the 2016 audit, it moves towards

creating a more accountable, effective, and transparent permitting program to achieve improved water quality and provide Wisconsin's farmers with the regulatory certainty the program currently lacks."