

Patty Schachtner: Clean water a deliberate policy choice

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In past years, the safety of our drinking water has come to the forefront of Wisconsin's political landscape. Extensive studies have shown not only the scale, but the drastic health consequences contaminated water has on our communities.

Contaminants like nitrates and bacteria have been linked to blue baby syndrome, thyroid disease, and some cancers, harming our rural communities. Meanwhile, lead continues to poison children statewide.

In Kewaunee County, [60 percent](#) of sampled wells were contaminated with fecal microbes, leading one of the researchers to proclaim that the water resembled a "[fecal soup](#)." A 2019 study found that [42 percent](#) of sampled wells in southwest Wisconsin contained contaminants that exceeded federal health standards.

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We didn't get here overnight. Budget cuts, along with a [deregulatory culture](#) and [political interference](#) across multiple agencies, have significantly impacted the way Wisconsin protects its water. To understand the current state of our water, we must look at the deliberate policy choices made in the past.

A chronological analysis details a systematic dismantling of the state's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). In 2011, environmental inspections of large farms [fell by 46 percent](#) while permit violation notices hit a 12-year low. Meanwhile, DNR experienced the [highest vacancy rate](#) in 14 years.

Just three years later, a judge declared a "[massive regulatory failure](#)" was behind

extensive groundwater contamination in Kewaunee County. The judge also indicated that the agency failed to use existing law to address the situation.

Despite concerns from impacted communities, environmental organizations, and the EPA, the previous administration continued to reduce the enforcement capabilities of key agencies. Over the course of three budgets passed by former governor Scott Walker and legislative Republicans, DNR saw their [budget slashed](#) by \$59 million and close to 200 positions eliminated.

Meanwhile, the Department of Justice (DOJ) under former attorney general Brad Schimel saw fines paid by Wisconsin polluters fall to [30-year lows](#) in 2015. The former attorney general also [wrote an opinion](#) claiming the DNR went too far in protecting water in 2016. During the same time period, he [demoted](#) the long-standing director of DOJ's environmental protection unit and shrunk the unit to its [smallest size in 25 years](#).

Clean water is essential to healthy communities, our economy, and our Wisconsin way of life. Governor Tony Evers understands this, and that's why he has declared 2019 the Year of Clean Drinking Water and August as National Water Quality Month. It's also why he invested additional resources to address water pollution, contaminated wells, and lead pipe replacement.

Clean water is a health issue. It is an economic issue. It is a moral issue. It's time we connect the dots and ensure that future generations can enjoy safe, clean water.

-Schachtner, D-Somerset, represents Wisconsin's 10th Senate District.