

Wisconsin's Green Fire: State budget could help farmers protect water quality

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Agriculture and clean water are vital to Wisconsin's economy and quality of life.

Farmers working to protect the environment can be found throughout the state, but Wisconsin's 2018 Water Quality Report to Congress still finds that farming practices are the leading cause of water pollution in Wisconsin.

Despite this, Wisconsin can take steps now and in the next state budget to reduce widespread water pollution associated with agricultural activities. The Legislature's Joint Finance Committee hears public testimony at its last scheduled budget hearing on April 25 in Green Bay.

Wisconsin's Green Fire (WGF), a statewide conservation organization promoting science-based management of natural resources, is asking state residents and their elected representatives to work with the agricultural industry to better protect drinking water and public health.

WGF recommends several steps that can be taken in the 2019-21 biennial budget to recognize both our water resources and the agricultural industry as necessary and significant contributors to Wisconsin's economic success.

A more complete discussion of these issues can be found in a publication released by *Wisconsin's Green Fire*: "Opportunities Now - An analysis of Priority Issues and Actions for Wisconsin's Natural Resources 2019-2021" available at <https://wlgreenfire.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/wgf-opportunities-now-report-sp-march-8th-2019.pdf>

Here is a snapshot of where things stand:

Constructive dialogue between farmers and their consumers on water quality protection, which is critical to positive change, is practically non-existent.

The rising intensity of both livestock and crop production in Wisconsin has increased soil erosion, polluted runoff to lakes and streams, as well as contaminated groundwater which serves as the drinking water source for two-thirds of the state's citizens.

The state's current approach to reduce pollutants flowing off farm fields or seeping into groundwater is a mix of voluntary practices, along with incentives and limited regulations. While successful in a handful of small watersheds, the current approach is failing to protect water statewide because it is greatly under-resourced and poorly supported throughout the food production system.

Wisconsin's county land and water conservation departments, charged with local implementation of the state's agricultural program to protect water quality, receive about one-fourth of the state support they received 25 years ago for both staff to work directly with farmers and incentives to help them.

Agriculture in Wisconsin is diverse, but dairy is dominant. Large operations known as CAFOs, representing just 4% of the state's dairy farms, produce 40% of its milk and a similar percentage of the manure statewide. Recently, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency determined that Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) review of CAFO permits was inadequate due to staff shortages, and compliance with manure management plans could not be assured.

According to a WGF analysis, CAFO fees retained by the DNR supported only 2.7% of that regulatory program's costs in 2015. For comparison, Wisconsin industries and municipalities with wastewater permits pay much higher fees supporting 66% of DNR costs to regulate those facilities. Taxpayers are currently funding most of the effort required to oversee the CAFO program.

Wisconsin's Green Fire recommends:

1. The governor direct state agencies and the university to engage with the agricultural community to foster greater understanding of their joint responsibilities to protect water resources and need for greater effort.
2. Greater oversight, compliance and incentives for agriculture in the 2019-21 state budget, including:
 - Increased annual segregated funding from the Dept of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection Soil and Water Resources Management Program budget for county conservation staffing and support grants.
 - Increased cost-share grant funding for agriculture runoff projects above the current \$3.5 million.
 - Permanent staffing for the DNR CAFO program above the minimum levels recommended by the 2016 Legislative Audit Bureau report, reflecting continued industry expansion and needs for improved compliance.
 - Increased CAFO permit fees to better reflect actual costs of program oversight, and allow the permit fees to fund the DNR CAFO program. Consider tiered rates based on size of facility.

The support sectors of agriculture, from suppliers and processors, consultants and trade groups, as well as state and local agencies, must help farmers with the changes needed to achieve water quality.