

Assembly passes largely bipartisan water quality bill package

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Assembly lawmakers passed a largely bipartisan group of bills from the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality.

But task force members from both parties agreed the package was the beginning, and not the end, of the Assembly's work on water quality.

Rep. Katrina Shankland, a Dem from Stevens Point who served as the panel's vice chair, urged her colleagues to pressure their "favorite senator" to pass the package before the session ends.

"If this is the last thing we do on water quality in the Legislature, we have failed," Shankland said, repeating the phrase several times for emphasis.

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Rep. Scott Krug, R-Nekoosa, mentioned that he already asked Sen. Patrick Testin, R-Stevens Point, to take up the bills.

Rep. Todd Novak, a Dodgeville Republican who chaired the panel, echoed Shankland's comments, saying water quality was not a partisan issue but instead "a Wisconsin issue."

"This is a start, this is not the end," Novak said. "I would love to do more but we just didn't get there."

The bills aren't on the Senate's Wednesday calendar and it only plans to hold one more floor period sometime in March.

The bills include:

*AB 789, which would change the Department of Natural Resources' well compensation grant program to make livestock wells contaminated by nitrates more easily eligible for the program, which is meant to assist landowners when dealing with contaminated wells. It passed unanimously 97-0.

*AB 790, which would provide nearly \$3 million in GPR in FY 2020-21 to the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection for expanding soil and water resource management program staff across the state. It passed 97-0.

*AB 791, which would extend a provision from 2017 Act 59 that provides grants to households for septic tank installation and maintenance. Today's bill would also require the Department of Safety and Professional Services to provide septic tank literature to counties for distribution. It passed by voice vote.

*AB 792, which would require the DATCP to collaborate with the Department of Natural Resources on the collection and disposal of firefighting foams containing polyfluoroalkyl substances, a group of unnatural substances that do not break down easily in the environment and may cause health problems. Gov. Tony Evers recently signed into law a bill banning the use of PFAS-containing firefighting foam in most circumstances. Today's bill passed unanimously 97-0.

*AB 793, which would change the way DNR administers flood control grants to no longer consider the grants in priority order. Rep. Chris Taylor, D-Madison, said it puts unnecessary burdens on municipalities and that it takes a step backwards by not prioritizing human health over industry. It passed 60-37, with Rep. Joel Kitchens, R-Sturgeon Bay, siding with Dems in opposition.

*AB 794, which would require the DNR to provide a 21-day public comment period whenever proposing changes to a list of possible groundwater contaminants. It would also require the Department of Health Services to provide a 21-day public comment period when proposing new enforcement standards based off of DNR's contaminants list. Dems accused the bill of letting special interests influence regulation on the front end. "Industry does not have a medical degree and it isn't their job to protect the public health," Shankland said. But the bill's author Rep. Mary Felzkowski, R-Irma, defended it by saying it would promote transparency in the regulation process, no matter which party controls the executive branch. It passed 62-36 along party lines.

*AB 795, which would create the position of a state managed grazing initiatives

coordinator in DATCP. The coordinator would be tasked with developing a state grazing plan and would also serve as the main state contact for grazing strategies. The bill would also provide DATCP with \$250,000 for a water stewardship grant certification program and expand eligibility for protection grants to producer-led groups. It passed 98-0.

*AB 796, which would require DATCP to collaborate with the UW System on establishing a nitrogen optimization pilot program. The program would provide grants to farmers for studies on the reduction of nitrogen overuse in agriculture. It passed 98-0.

*AB 797, which would prohibit the sale of coal tar-based sealants, as well as ban sealant products with more than 0.1 percent polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons by weight. PAHs are a series of naturally and unnaturally-occurring chemicals which high exposure to could create liver abnormalities and breathing issues, according to the EPA. Violators of the ban would be subject to a fine up to \$5,000. The bill unanimously passed 98-0.

*AB 798, which would provide DNR with \$150,000 for biomanipulation grants meant to improve water quality in certain lakes around the state. It passed 62-36 along party lines.

*AB 799, which would create an Office of Water Policy in the UW System. It would also require the governor to appoint a director of the office to streamline water conservation and management practices in the state. The System estimates the office would have an ongoing cost of at least \$124,000. It passed 98-0.

*AB 800, which would increase funding for the Center for Watershed Science and Education at UW-Stevens Point by \$900,000 and establish a public database of private well water quality information from across the state. The bill would also allocate \$250,000 to DNR for a well testing grant program and require counties to inform residents on the importance of testing their private wells. It passed unanimously 98-0.

*AB 801, which would provide \$2 million in GPR funds to the UW System Board of Regents to establish a freshwater collaborative between up to six UW System universities. The collaborative would: study water quality and water quality management practices in the state; establish a work-study internship program for water science undergraduates; provide scholarships and student support programs;

increase marketing and recruitment measures in freshwater science and increase faculty and staff for training programs. The bill passed 97-0.