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Rep. Kerkman: Audit recommends recycling program improvements and best practices

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MADISON – Today, the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) released its audit of state recycling programs administered by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) as report 20-21. In report 20-22, which was also released today, LAB identified 15 best practices that local recycling programs can use to comply with state recycling laws and improve the administration of their programs.

DNR administers two recycling programs that award grants to cover a portion of the recycling program costs of responsible units, which are generally municipalities and counties. In fiscal year (FY) 2019-20, $20 million was appropriated to these two programs. DNR also administers the E-Cycle program, which requires manufacturers of certain electronic devices to recycle or pay for the recycling of such devices that had been sold to households and schools.

LAB found DNR did not comply with statutes because it spent funds appropriated for recycling administration on activities related to recycling but not allowed by statutes, reviewed fewer recycling programs in recent years than was statutorily required, and did not fully comply with its administrative rules. LAB included recommendations for DNR to improve its administration of its recycling programs.

“Most people that take their time to recycle expect that the program runs efficiently,” said Senator Robert Cowles (R-Green Bay). “On a state level, the State Recycling Program is intended to provide guidance, oversight, and funding for

responsible resource management. However, this audit highlights that the State Recycling Program is out of date and needs modernizing and updating. Recycling is in a pivotal moment with shifting markets and evolving packaging, and the DNR needs to reprioritize this program and get it back on track rather than allowing it to fall into further noncompliance. I want to thank the LAB for their diligent work to identify areas of concern and providing recommendations for needed improvement."

DATCP administers the Clean Sweep program, which awards grants to local governments for collecting and disposing of household hazardous waste, unwanted prescription drugs, and agricultural pesticides. In FY 2019-20, $750,000 was appropriated to this program. LAB found that DATCP did not require grant recipients to submit documentation to verify all expenditures for which reimbursement was requested. LAB recommended that DACTP require submission of such documentation.

LAB surveyed all 1,077 responsible units on their opinions about DNR's recycling grant programs and DATCP's Clean Sweep program. A total of 585 responsible units (53.4 percent) responded. Respondents represented 66.8 percent of Wisconsin's population. Most respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the recycling program-related assistance that DNR and DATCP provided them. Respondents indicated that they were less satisfied with their grant amounts. LAB indicated that the Legislature could consider modifying the statutorily required method used by DNR to award recycling grants, which is based on the proportions of total available grant funding that each responsible unit had received in 1999.

"The LAB's work finds some areas for the agencies to tighten up, such as reviewing administrative rules from 1993 and updating them to be more nimble and reflective of today's markets," said Rep. Samantha Kerkman (R-Salem Lakes). Local recycling programs are really stretching their funding, and overall there are a lot of ideas to make the program flexible and more efficient with state dollars."

Copies of LAB's reports (report 20-21 and report 20-22) may be obtained from its website at www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lab or by calling (608) 266-2818. Report concerns related to state government activities to LAB by calling the toll-free hotline

at 1-877-FRAUD-17.