

Environmental, agricultural groups: Lay out budget blueprint for clean water

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MADISON, Wis. — Four environmental and agricultural groups, working as partners to bring about long-term solutions to Wisconsin's water quality issues, detailed significant investments today that they urge the state to make when shaping the next budget and beyond.

[The proposal](#) centers on ensuring that directly affected residents have safe wells, current conservation efforts are boosted and innovation is fostered, including steps to address the effects of climate change.

The plan by Clean Wisconsin, the Dairy Business Association, The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin, and WI Land+Water comes on the eve of public hearings that start Friday regarding the 2021-23 state budget. The items fit into a framework of [policy principles](#) the groups announced in December.

"We must commit to long-term solutions and bold action," the groups said in their new proposal.

They are calling for financial assistance for residents and funding for farmers' conservation practices. The plan includes a mix of spending over the biennium as well as ongoing commitments.

Current funding is falling far short to achieve the groups' vision of having clean drinking water and resilient farms, Mark Redsten, president and CEO of Clean Wisconsin, said.

“We need to recognize that current conservation and clean water investments are nowhere near what is necessary to take on these challenges. It’s time to put real money on the table, to deliver on the promise of clean drinking water and to support farmers in these efforts,” Redsten said.

Matt Krueger, executive director of WI Land+Water, which supports county conservation departments and committees, stressed the importance of reinforcing professional staff at the local level.



Krueger

“To achieve our shared goals for clean water and resilient farms in Wisconsin, we must invest in our conservation infrastructure — specifically, in people,” Krueger said. “County conservation department professionals provide trusted technical advice to private landowners and farmers, and implement conservation assistance programs, whether at the federal, state or local levels. Investing in these local conservation leaders is essential if we are to meet and rise above the current challenges facing water quality and farms.”

The groups also recommend increasing grants and other incentives for farmers, including those in watershed conservation groups who are expanding the use of innovative practices to protect water quality.

“The work that farmers in Wisconsin are already doing to implement soil health practices and track their outcomes shows that agriculture can be part of the solution to some of our biggest challenges, from water quality to climate change,” Elizabeth Koehler, state director for The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin, said.

“Scaling this effort up will require a greater investment in technical expertise and incentive programs to give more farmers the tools they need to protect our waters, capture carbon and keep their farms profitable,” she said.

Amy Penterman, president of the Dairy Business Association, said there is no easy fix to the state's complex water quality challenges, including nitrates.

"Addressing nitrates in groundwater will require a long-term commitment and a multi-prong approach. We need to start that process now," Penterman said. "Agriculture is showing it is part of the solution by aiding in necessary research and implementing new strategies on the land to minimize nitrate leaching. "

"We all value clean water and we all want economically and environmentally resilient farms," she said. "The fact that our groups have come together to find common ground demonstrates the very real opportunity Wisconsin has, as a statewide community, to invest in lasting solutions. We need to seize it."