

Dept. of Natural Resources: Groundwater Coordinating Council releases annual report

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MADISON, Wis. – The [Wisconsin Groundwater Coordinating Council](#) today shared key recommendations for protecting and preserving vital groundwater resources in its 2022 annual report to the Wisconsin State Legislature. The recommendations focus on setting new and revised health-based groundwater standards, evaluating and addressing drinking water contamination from nitrates and perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl (PFAS) chemicals.

Nearly three-quarters of Wisconsinites rely on groundwater as their primary source for drinking water. Wisconsin's groundwater also plays a critical role in supporting the state's agricultural and tourism economy – whether it's to irrigate crops, water cattle, and process a wide variety of foods, or feed trout streams and spring-fed lakes. The council supports the sustainable management of groundwater quantity and quality in the state to ensure that safe groundwater is available for everyone's use, while protecting and improving our health, economy, and environment now and into the future.

“Every Wisconsinite deserves access to safe, clean drinking water, but we know that for too many communities across our state that's not the case,” said Gov. Tony Evers. “We've taken important steps forward like declaring 2019 the Year of Clean Drinking Water, providing grants to help farmers mitigate nitrates, and investing \$10 million to help well owners address contamination, and the Groundwater Coordinating Council's annual report plays an important role in informing our work toward ensuring clean, safe water for folks across our state.”

The key recommendations in the report address some of the most prevalent and

pressing issues in Wisconsin water quality, including:

- Setting new and revised health-based groundwater standard recommendations received from DHS;
- Protecting groundwater from nitrate and other agricultural contaminants and;
- Addressing public health and environmental concerns from perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl (PFAS) chemicals.

Wisconsin has a long and proud history of groundwater protection. Wisconsin's groundwater law adopted in 1983, is held up as one of the nation's model environmental laws in part because of its robust, science-based process for protecting the quality of our groundwater and public health.

For nearly 40 years, this law has guided the process that DHS and the DNR follow, ensuring a scientifically rigorous review of available technical information and clarity on how recommended groundwater standards are selected. However, the DNR was unsuccessful in adopting revisions to groundwater standards earlier this year after several years of being prevented from revising standards.

"I am disappointed that none of the DHS recommendations for new or revised health-based groundwater standards were approved this year. It is important for the state to set standards for substances that are detected in groundwater and are shown to have a detrimental effect on human health. Adequate supplies of uncontaminated groundwater are crucial not only for the water we consume but also for our agricultural operations and breweries in Wisconsin," said Jim Zellmer, Groundwater Coordinating Council Chair and Deputy Division Administrator for the DNR's Environmental Management Division. "Adopting groundwater standards are key for all council member agencies in their continuing work to ensure every Wisconsinite has access to clean, safe drinking water. Clean drinking water in Wisconsin remains a public health priority for the council in 2022 and beyond."

Areas of the state with a greater density of agriculture generally have a higher frequency of nitrate and pesticide detection. The report recommends supporting research assessing conservation plans that identify and encourage the use of alternate cropping and nutrient management practices that help prevent agricultural nitrogen from reaching groundwater. The council also recommends developing an outreach program to spur action on implementing these plans.

Perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl (PFAS) chemicals have been detected in drinking

water and groundwater throughout Wisconsin. PFAS are a group of human-made chemicals used for decades in numerous products, including non-stick cookware, fast food wrappers, stain-resistant sprays and certain types of firefighting foam. These contaminants have made their way into the environment, and humans and animals can develop negative health impacts when exposed to them.

The report highlights the challenges of removing PFAS from groundwater. The Council recommends establishing PFAS groundwater enforcement standards to guide cleanup efforts and safeguard public health, and continuing to identify PFAS sources and their potential impacts to groundwater and the environment. The Groundwater Coordinating Council also supports the [Wisconsin PFAS Action Council \(WisPAC\)](#) in developing and coordinating statewide PFAS initiatives.

The 2022 report also highlights the need for increased support of applied groundwater research to protect and preserve our valuable groundwater resources. Wisconsin is recognized as a national leader in groundwater research largely due to the GCC's well-established research funding process coordinated by the GCC. Increased funding could be used to address emerging groundwater contaminant concerns such as PFAS.

[More information is available on the DNR's Wisconsin Groundwater Coordinating Council webpage.](#)