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Wisconsin water protection advocates: Urge approval of PFAS standards

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This month the Natural Resources Board of the Department of Natural Resources will have on its agenda three administrative rules related to PFAS or “forever chemicals.” They set standards for drinking water, surface waters and groundwater. The undersigned organizations encourage the NRB to approve all three of these rules to protect the health of people in Wisconsin.

We support these rules for several reasons.

Protecting Human Health

First and foremost, these rules are to protect our health. PFAS is a large family of chemicals, and what we know so far is that they are associated with certain types of cancer, harm to the immune system, interference with hormones, increased cholesterol, low birth weight, increased blood pressure in pregnant women and others. In the case of PFAS, the list of health concerns has grown over time as they are studied more. Because of this the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has said they are considering lowering their advisory level of 70 ppt.

When we speak about health it is important to take a minute and really think about what this means because just reading it can seem detached. We are talking about a wide array of significant health risks faced by all people, but especially women of childbearing age and young children, from substances they did nothing to release into the environment or expose themselves to except drink water they had every right to assume was safe. Wisconsin has a history of acting to protect human health from environmental contamination, and we should continue that heritage.

Urgency

This is not an academic exercise; there are a growing number of areas of the state where there is PFAS contamination. Marinette, La Crosse and Eau Claire have known for a while they have contamination, and more recently Wausau found PFAS in their wells. There will likely be more discoveries. We need to act as soon as possible to address this problem. Polluting companies and their mouthpieces like Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce have said we should wait for the EPA to set standards. There are two gaping flaws in this argument. First, people are suffering now. Waiting for the EPA would mean that we would not have standards until the end of the decade. It is not the Wisconsin way to let people suffer when we can act now. Second, EPA does not have jurisdiction over groundwater and hence would never set standards for groundwater. Given that there are tens of thousands of people who get their drinking water from private wells this would leave a huge population unprotected.

Fairness

No one has a right to pollute; no one has the right to harm others. Yet we are currently allowing this to happen. It is not just devastating for those who have to deal with health impacts and loss of property value, it is unfair. These people did not cause the problem and yet they have to bear the burden of it. These rules will help shift responsibility to where it belongs: on those who have caused the problem. Without these rules individuals and taxpayers will continue to bear the costs while those who caused the problem get off scot free.

For these reasons the following organizations support the three PFAS rules before the Board. We ask the NRB to pass them and send them to the legislature.

River Alliance of Wisconsin

Bill Davis

Wisconsin Conservation Voters

Peter Buress

Wisconsin Farmers Union

Nick Levendofsky

Clean Wisconsin

Scott Laeser

Sierra Club – Wisconsin Chapter

Elizabeth Ward

Milwaukee Riverkeeper

Cheryl Nenn

Midwest Environmental Advocates

Rob Lee

Wisconsin Trout Unlimited

Mike Kuhr