STATE AFFAIRS
WISPOLITICS
Wisconsin's Premier Political News Service

Sen. Quinn: Guest Column: Improving wetlands to manage flooding

Posted on Wednesday, Apr 26, 2023

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. Get the app or access via desktop.

It is spring, and the floods have started again. We in the north are all too familiar with this pattern. Douglas, Bayfield, Ashland, Burnett, Washburn, Sawyer, Iron, and Barron Counties have all been the sites of flooding disasters in the past 10 years. Over that time, the state of Wisconsin reported roughly $365 million in property damage from flooding. And for the most part, our state programs have focused on replacing structures, repairing roads and bridges, and cleaning up after flood events – only to see the same culverts destroyed and the same roads washed out year after year.

Working with a diverse array of organizations, I authored a bill with Representative Loren Oldenburg from Viroqua that would drastically change our state's approach. Our recent AB 222 / SB 222, the pre-disaster flood resilience grant, will create a program that uses scientific and conservation techniques to achieve the dual purposes of restoring wetlands and reducing flooding. We want to encourage natural flood management, allowing the land to capture, store, and slowly release runoff.

Our bill will create assessment grants of up to $300,000 and implementation grants of up to $250,000 to give to cities, villages, towns, counties, regional planning commissions, or tribes to plan and perform interventions to make the landscape more flood resilient. Grants must go to areas that have been designated as areas of flood disasters or flood emergencies, or to areas that have written and state-approved flood hazard mitigation plans.

This type of program has been proven to work in Ashland County, which, thanks to its geologic history and unique soils is at an elevated flooding risk. In 2019 as a member of the State Assembly I co-sponsored a bill that funded a pilot program

within that county to explore natural flood management. A team of researchers, working in collaboration with local partners throughout the Marengo River Watershed, mapped areas where flooding could be expected in future years. Some of these areas, to no one's surprise, coincided with places that had seen washouts year after year. They recommended tactics like ravine stabilization, floodplain reconnection, and wetland restoration within their project area.

As I'm writing this, 11 organizations have registered their support of this bill. One of them, Audubon Great Lakes, noted how healthy wetlands provide clean drinking water for the entire Great Lakes region, protect our local communities from flooding and drought, and keep the water in our inland lakes and streams clean. This has a profound impact on our landscape, as wetlands also provide important wildlife habitat. I am grateful for their support and for the support of organizations like the Wisconsin Wetlands Association that have put a lot of time and effort into our bill.

I plan on holding a hearing on SB 222 in early May and will work with my colleagues to create this important new program and fund it through the state budget. Once it is signed into law, Wisconsin will serve as a national model for how to use wetlands to promote natural flood resilience techniques. By enhancing the landscape's ability to retain water we will save money and make our state safer and cleaner.