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Contact: Danielle Endvick, 715-471-0398 or dendvick@wisconsinfarmersunion.com

WFU disappointed by passage of short-sighted High-Cap Well Bill

CHIPPEWA FALLS – Wisconsin Farmers Union expressed disappointment at the passage of SB 76 by the legislature this week.

“This bill had the potential to provide a real, meaningful path forward for farmers in the Central Sands, but it went for the shallow quick fix instead,” said WFU Government Relations Director Kara O’Connor. “There is clear and mounting evidence that over-pumping in the Central Sands region is causing declines in lake and stream levels. The sooner we all acknowledge that fact, the sooner we can all start to work together to find real solutions.”

The most recent scientific study to make the link between irrigation wells and surface water drawdown in the Central Sands was the Little Plover River groundwater flow modeling project completed last summer by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and other partners. That study found that:

- Irrigation wells up to a mile and a half away from the Little Plover River can impact stream flows;
- There is a delay of weeks to months from the time that pumping stops until river levels rebound; and
- If pumping is repeated year after year the river never fully recovers from summertime seasonal drawdowns.

O’Connor responded to the frequently-heard refrain that “farmers need certainty” in their high-cap well permits. “Anyone who is telling farmers that this bill provides them all the certainty that they need when it comes to water is dealing in false promises,” said O’Connor. “We are going to have more conflict, more tension, and more legislative and legal battles if we don’t get to the core problem, which is how to allocate water between competing uses during times when water is scarce. We as a farming community are not doing ourselves any favors by doubling down on current practices that are putting us at odds with the tourism industry and with our neighbors.” O’Connor continued, “We already have farmers and homeowners in the Central Sands whose wells are failing because of water drawdown. Where is the certainty in this bill for them?”

WFU does applaud one aspect of the bill, which allows farmers to repair, replace, or transfer ownership of a high-capacity well without review by the DNR. “When a well breaks or fails in the middle of the season, farmers now they know they can repair or replace the well at the same location and capacity, no questions asked. That aspect of the bill is absolutely helpful to farmers,” said O’Connor. Despite this beneficial component, WFU did not support the legislation as written because it failed to provide for periodic review of all wells at regular intervals. As a result, the DNR has no mechanism for reviewing or modifying high-capacity well permits in the future if they are collectively having a negative impact on a water body or on a neighbor’s more shallow well.

“The legislature missed an important opportunity to provide farmers true long-term certainty in their water access and an end to the fractious debate over water in this state,” said O’Connor. “Wisconsin Farmers Union will continue to advocate for a truly comprehensive groundwater bill that acknowledges the shared nature of Wisconsin’s water resource.”

Wisconsin Farmers Union, a member-driven organization, is committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement. For more information visit www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

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