



## Portage County Livestock Facility Ordered to Test Groundwater as Concerns Over Nitrate Pollution Continue to Grow

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**MADISON, WI—** On Friday, August 12, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced that the agency has finalized a [wastewater discharge permit](#) for Gordondale Farms, a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) at the center of growing concerns about drinking water pollution in Portage County.

According to the terms of the new permit, the farm must install groundwater monitoring wells upgradient of the Village of Nelsonville. The modification is necessary because the recharge zone for the groundwater that Nelsonville residents rely on includes fields on which the farm spreads its manure.

Gordondale Farms' original permit was the subject of a [2020 legal challenge](#) because it did not do enough to protect local drinking water. The challenge was brought by a group of local residents represented by Midwest Environmental Advocates (MEA). Clean Wisconsin also challenged the permit.

In April 2022, DNR proposed modifying the permit to include new groundwater monitoring requirements. Community members who attended a public hearing on the draft permit in May testified by a 10-to-1 margin in favor of DNR's proposed changes. Those changes were incorporated into the final permit issued on Friday.

Gordondale's permit is the third CAFO permit to incorporate conditions and authority outlined in a [landmark Supreme Court decision](#) last year. The decision affirmed the DNR's authority to use commonsense permit conditions such as groundwater monitoring and limits on herd size to address nitrate contamination and other threats to water quality.

"We are pleased that the DNR has demonstrated its commitment to protecting natural resources and the health of Wisconsin residents by requiring groundwater monitoring," said **MEA Staff Attorney Adam Voskuil**.

Groundwater in the area around Gordondale Farms is especially vulnerable to nitrate pollution due to the area's sandy soils. In 2018, the Portage County Health Department tested private drinking water wells in Nelsonville and found that [almost half were contaminated with high levels of nitrates](#). Nitrate is the most widespread contaminant in Wisconsin, and approximately 90 percent of nitrate in groundwater can be traced back to agriculture.

The ongoing water quality crisis has led local residents to call for increased accountability and oversight of large livestock operations like Gordondale Farms. Despite [opposition from Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce and other lobbyists for industrial agriculture](#), Nelsonville residents have refused to back down and have worked for four years to counter misinformation and push back on attempts to point the finger elsewhere.

“There is nothing wrong with our wells,” wrote **MEA client and Nelsonville resident Lisa Anderson** in a July email to the Portage County Board of Supervisors. “They are not shallow, poorly constructed, or illegal wells as the farm operator once said. There is no septic system up-gradient of most of the homes, and science shows us that even if there was, almost all of the wells draw water deeper in the aquifer where septic system contributions to nitrates aren't reaching well water.”

**MEA client and Nelsonville resident Katy Bailey** said, “DNR oversight is absolutely essential to protecting our health. The new permit isn’t perfect, but it is a step in the right direction, and it will help ensure the safety of our community’s drinking water.”

Learn more about this case [here](#).

*Midwest Environmental Advocates is a nonprofit law center that combines the power of law with the resolve of communities facing environmental injustice to secure and protect the rights of all people to healthy water, land, and air. Learn more at [www.midwestadvocates.org](http://www.midwestadvocates.org) or [www.facebook.com/midwestadvocates](https://www.facebook.com/midwestadvocates).*

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