

A Growing Thirst for Groundwater

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Where water demand outpaces supply, times warrant a fresh look at a resource considered unfathomable and unending.

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Excerpts:

In the last century, pumping has reduced groundwater levels by 450 feet around Milwaukee and Waukesha, by more than 300 feet in the Green Bay area, and by about 60 feet in Dane County. These long-term drops in groundwater levels affect the quantity and quality of water available to communities, private well users, and in some cases to the lakes, rivers, wetlands and springs that depend on them for year-round flow.

The search for new water supplies and technological fixes is compounding these problems, revealing weaknesses in state laws that govern the siting and operation of wells. It's also pitting communities and residents against one another and the natural resources they adore.

For example, in southeastern Wisconsin, Waukesha County is pumping 25 percent more groundwater than in 1979, contributing to a dropping water table and drawing water from rock layers that liberate naturally-occurring radium into drinking water, which must be treated.

"We're beginning to realize what we've been taking for granted for a long time," says Ted Wysocki, New Berlin's mayor. There has to be stewardship of groundwater and it's more than what we thought 30 years ago, (which was) "let's protect it and keep it clean."

"The fact is that there are places where obtaining a ready supply of water is already a challenge. Matters will only worsen unless we make changes," says DNR Water Administrator Todd Amb's. "We need to make a conscious choice to deal with these issues. The alternative is to let a crisis or circumstances beyond our control dictate how we manage water."

The Groundwater Protection Act passed last March expands DNR authority over groundwater wells by requiring advance notice before any wells are constructed. The law directs DNR to review environmental consequences of proposed high capacity wells in certain situations:

within 1,200 feet of any surface water identified as an Outstanding Resource Water (like a pristine lake), an Exceptional Resource Water" (like a wild river) or trout stream;

a well that has a water loss of more than 95 percent of the water withdrawn (like a beverage bottler);

any well that may significantly affect a spring that has a minimum flow of one cubic foot per second for at least 80 percent of the time.

The law doesn't protect all of the water resources that need protection, "but it's a start," Amb's says, and it's one that enjoyed broad, bipartisan support: the bill passed 99-0 in the Assembly and 31-1 in the Senate.