Message

From: Holst, Linda [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=97E4A65ADDD9494FA193C98DD5D12B55-LHOLST]
Sent: 5/4/2018 3:51:04 PM
To: Patrick Kuefler [Kuefler.Patrick@epa.gov]; Bahr, Ryan [bahr.ryan@epa.gov]
Subject: FW: EPA investigates possible groundwater contamination in central Wisconsin as worries grow

FYI

From: Lippert, Allison
Sent: Friday, May 04, 2018 10:32 AM
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Subject: EPA investigates possible groundwater contamination in central Wisconsin as worries grow

https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2018/05/04/epa-investigates-possible-groundwater-contamination-central-wisconsin-worries-grow/579422002/

EPA investigates possible groundwater contamination in central Wisconsin as worries grow

Lee Bergquist, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 8:56 a.m. CT May 4, 2018 | Updated 9:23 a.m. CT May 4, 2018

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency investigated potential groundwater contamination in central Wisconsin this week after longstanding complaints over the health impact farms may pose to drinking water.

On Monday, workers from the EPA began a large-scale project to drill wells in Juneau County near a large dairy farm to test for elevated levels of nitrates and other contamination, according state and federal officials.

The visit underscores growing concerns in rural areas over the impact manure spreading and other farming practices may have on groundwater, lakes and streams. Manure as fertilizer is a source of nitrogen. In water, it becomes nitrate.

Separately, Juneau County's water quality problems have prompted plans by county health and conservation authorities to test about 90 homes on May 30 in the Town of Armenia where the EPA is conducting its testing. Other testing will take place in Wood County.

"It's a big concern, and it's growing," said Matthew Komiskey, who heads up land and water conservation in the county.

After years of complaints, Komiskey said officials need to test drinking water to understand the source of the problem.

"At this point, it's pretty well undocumented," he said.

In the case of nitrates, infants and pregnant women are at a higher risk of harm from elevated levels. Nitrates can cause "blue baby syndrome" by reducing the ability of blood to deliver oxygen to the body.

The farm in question, Central Sands Dairy in the Town of Armenia, is a concentrated animal feeding operation, or CAFO, with a permit to manage more than 6,000 cattle, state records show.

The Department of Natural Resources said it was told by the federal agency that crews would be drilling wells and sampling water until Friday.

DNR spokesman Jim Dick said the EPA informed state officials that it planned to conduct groundwater sampling around the Central Sands Dairy, which is located west of Lake Petenwell, a flowage created by a dam on the Wisconsin River.

An EPA spokeswoman said crews planned to dig 41 bore holes at depths of 30 to 34 feet and 45 to 49 feet in an area west of Petenwell.

EPA spokeswoman Allison Lippert said the agency's efforts is a response to "numerous complaints from citizens in the area" about private drinking water well contamination.

If problems are found, she said, her agency will work with state and local agencies to address the situation.

Lippert said as a matter of practice the agency conducts "numerous inspections and evaluations of different types" to ensure environmental laws are being followed.

The EPA took a strong interest in contaminated wells in Kewaunee County in recent years, prompting the DNR to push toughen standards for manure spreading in areas of eastern Wisconsin.

Several experts interviewed were surprised by the scope of the EPA's latest efforts.

"I have not encountered anything like that," said Kevin Masarik, groundwater education specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

The EPA's work lies in a region where sandy soil allows groundwater to readily collect in seams, often only a few feet below ground. Manure and pesticides can infiltrate the groundwater.

Representatives of Central Sands Dairy did not respond to a request to provide a comment.

The farm has come under the watchful eye of local activists.

The owners, the Wysocki Family of Companies, want to build another large dairy farm in the Town of Saratoga in neighboring Wood County.

Some residents, including the group Protect Wood County and its Neighbors, are fighting the project, with worries about pollution and traffic congestion.

The Village of Saratoga also balked at issuing a building permit for the farm and later approved stricter zoning rules. Wysocki challenged the actions, and the case is now before the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

The arrival of the EPA was first publicized by Criste Sullivan-Greening, who has been active in local environmental issues and posted a video and photos of the EPA's activity on her Facebook page.

"To know that someone is putting pressure on them — even if nothing comes of it — I think it's karma," Sullivan-Greening said. "I just love it."

Concerns about nitrates are not new, she said. "Some people have been drinking bottled water for years," she said.

UW-Stevens Point's groundwater data base shows 19% of 202 samples from the Town of Armenia exceed the state drinking water standard for nitrate.

But Masarik cautioned that the samples are submitted by property owners and the university can't vouch for their integrity of how the water was collected.

In Juneau County's upcoming well tests in the township, samples will be collected by county staff and analyzed by UW-Stevens Point.

The source of problems could be farms — or deficient septic systems that contaminate wells, Komiskey said.

“First of all, we have to find out how widespread it is,” he said. “We are not pointing any fingers.”