

GUEST VIEWS

Address issues to protect water

—*Green Bay Press-Gazette*

The state Department of Natural Resources' enforcement of its water pollution laws has faced renewed scrutiny since an audit was released in early June.

The Legislative Audit Bureau examined the agency's wastewater permitting and enforcement practices and found issues with staffing, procedures and backlogs.

The audit found the DNR didn't follow its own policies when it came to

overseeing about 1,250 municipal and industrial wastewater facilities and large livestock operations, also known as concentrated animal feeding operations.

Among the findings:

From 2005-2015, the DNR met its permit backlog goal four of the 11 years for municipal permits and nine of the 11 years for CAFOs. However, in that time, it never met the goal for industrial permits.

Turnover, especially among those responsible for CAFO permitting and oversight, has increased from 6 percent in 2005 to 20 percent in 2014. This not only affects the number of people available to monitor compliance, but it requires additional training of new hires.

Of about 1,900 reports required from CAFOs, 36 had been electronically recorded as received. This might not seem like a big deal, but as the audit points out, "without this information, program managers have no way to reliably assess the extent to which timely submission of required annual reports is a concern."

Of 260 CAFO permits that expired and were reissued from 2006-14, the DNR inspected only 17 to determine that they were in "substantial compliance" before reissuing a permit.

The DNR issued municipal and industrial permit holders a notice of violation for only 33 of 558 instance for which a notice should have been issued. Of those 33, 17 didn't address all of the violations.

The findings surprised the Natural Resources Board, according to state Sen. Rob Cowles, R-Allouez, who is co-chairman of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, which requested the audit.

The topic was brought up at the June meeting of the Natural Resources Board, where much of the discussion focused on staffing.

In the 2010-11 fiscal year, 15 of the 70 staff members overseeing municipal and industrial permits left their positions, according to the audit, and four of the 16 staff members overseeing CAFO permits.

DNR staffing overall has been declining since the 1990s. It's a bipartisan issue as cuts have happened under both Democratic and Republican governors.

The audit also comes at a time when environmentalists and critics of Gov. Scott Walker say enforcement efforts have declined since 2011.

Cowles has a suggestion that we believe the Legislature should act on: Allow the DNR to keep more of the fees it collects from CAFOs, municipal wastewater and industrial operations. The Wisconsin State Journal reported that the agency keeps less than \$90,000 of the \$5 million to \$7 million it collects each year from these operations. The rest goes to the general fund.

That's a start. But the next Legislature needs to seriously look at adequately funding the DNR so it can hire staff to enforce its water pollution laws.

On Nov. 1, the DNR reports back to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee about what's being done to address the issues.

Meanwhile, DNR funding likely won't be dealt with until the next budget next year.

That means the legislators we elect in November will have a say in this matter. Talk to the candidates. Ask them how they plan on protecting our precious water resource. We need to protect our surface and ground water for us and for future generations.

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