

Reject fear-mongering: Science supports responsible high-capacity well use

By Andy Wallendal and Gordon Speirs

When it comes to water, farmers are passionate. Water is essential to growing crops. Preserving the ability to use water for future farming generations is just part of being a farmer.

Wisconsin is fortunate to enjoy an abundant supply for drinking, growing crops, nourishing livestock, manufacturing products and recreation.

So, when someone announces that our beautiful lakes, rivers and streams are drying up — and that there are no controls — we take notice.

And, when that someone blames those who rely on high-capacity wells, we cry foul.

There are “environmental activists,” and there are also “active environmentalists”.

Farmers are the latter. They work on their land. They live on their land and they raise families on their land. They know full well that depleting the aquifer will threaten their livelihoods, their families’ future and Wisconsin’s wonderful natural resources.

A recent guest column published by Gannett Wisconsin Media entitled, “Our groundwater needs stronger protections,” falsely, unfairly and irresponsibly characterizes the use of groundwater in the state and the regulation of that use.

The writers demanded more regulation over the use of these wells, claiming that the wells are being over-pumped — but they provided no evidence to back it up. They particularly targeted the Central Sands region in central Wisconsin where vegetable growers have a long and storied history of responsible food production and environmental stewardship.

Sandy glacial soils and the easily accessible aquifer make Central Sands ideal for growing vegetables. With an average annual rainfall of 32 inches, the aquifer in the 1.75 million acre region is replenished with 1.5 trillion gallons of water each year. That keeps groundwater levels constant, with only minor fluctuations.

In Portage County, for example, a recent study found the same or higher levels of groundwater in wells drilled a half century ago.

Vegetable growers play a vital role in maintaining those levels. They use state-of-the-art equipment and techniques to conserve water when irrigating. Innovative technologies such as soil moisture sensors, continuous monitoring of irrigation equipment and off-peak watering to avoid evaporation ensure that water is conserved.

They also invest hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in research related to water conservation and work closely with the University of Wisconsin on innovations in areas such as root depth, landscape

design and crop rotations that will guarantee ample groundwater and bountiful harvests in the future.

Today, farmers in the Central Sands grow 95 percent of the potatoes they did a decade ago on 20 percent fewer acres, which means that they have reduced water use by 25 percent in just 10 years.

Those efforts are a major reason why Wisconsin ranks first in the production of green beans, second in carrots and third in potatoes, sweet corn and peas, contributing greatly to the state's diverse and vibrant \$88 billion agricultural economy.

We agree that lawmakers need to act — but not with new, stifling regulations. We need legislation that provides the Department of Natural Resources staff with scientifically sound guidelines for approving new wells.

A current backlog of permit applications has left Wisconsin at a dangerous standstill that threatens massive investment in communities across the state, vital food supplies and an important piece of our heritage.

This is not a choice between family-supporting jobs and the environment. When we base our regulatory decisions on science, both can thrive.

Farmers are passionate about growing safe, nutritious food. We are equally passionate about protecting Wisconsin's water.

We have proven our commitment time and again and will continue to do so.

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