



December 5, 2024

Dear Wisconsin Legislators,

No matter who we are or where we live, all of us want to live in communities where we can turn on the tap and know the water coming out of it is safe to drink – both for us, and the people we love. Fifty years ago, Republican President Gerald Ford signed the Safe Drinking Water Act into law, which promised to protect our drinking water. Fast forward to today, and it is clear: Wisconsin has not used the Safe Drinking Water Act to fully protect our communities. Across the state, tens of thousands of Wisconsinites are still forced to protect themselves and their families from harmful contaminants by relying on five-gallon water jugs for everyday tasks like brushing their teeth, washing dishes, mixing baby formula, and preparing meals. PFAS, lead, and nitrate contamination are of particular concern due to their impact on our health across a wide range of Wisconsin communities.

- PFAS are dangerous, man-made chemicals tied to increased cholesterol levels, thyroid disease, certain cancers, and pregnancy complications.¹ To date, ninety-one public water systems need financial resources to protect their drinking water from PFAS, and there is more we need to do to deliver support to the one-third of Wisconsinites who rely on private groundwater wells for their drinking water.²
- No level of lead in drinking water is safe. Elevated blood lead levels in children are associated with hearing loss, lower IQs, developmental delays, behavioral challenges, and emotional impacts like anxiety and depression.³ In some Wisconsin communities, as many as one in four children under six years old are considered lead poisoned.⁴ Wisconsin still has 150,000 lead service lines scattered across more than 70 communities.⁵
- Manure and fertilizer from industrial agribusiness contain dangerous pathogens, bacteria, and chemicals that when managed improperly can contaminate our water and contribute to a host of serious health impacts. One common contaminant from manure and fertilizer is nitrate, which is linked to serious negative health effects including cancer, birth defects, and even infant death.⁶ An estimated 42,000 private wells exceed the health standard for nitrate.⁷

¹ <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/chemical/pfas.htm>

² <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/PFAS/DataViewer>

³ <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/lead/clppp-info.htm>

⁴ <https://dhsgis.wi.gov/dhs/clpde/>

⁵ https://psc.wi.gov/Documents/water/2023_LSL_totals_per_utility_Final.pdf

⁶ <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/water/nitrate.htm>

⁷ https://widnr.widen.net/view/pdf/c5e61bs1x6/DG_GCC_Report_2024.pdf

Across our state, local community leaders are working hard to address these challenges and provide safe drinking water to their neighbors, but they need help from our state leaders. Proactively tackling these issues with statewide investments would better-protect public health, and it would also save us up to \$2.04 billion annually by helping families avoid the healthcare expenses associated with PFAS,⁸ lead,⁹ and nitrate contamination.¹⁰ Without statewide investments, water utilities will either need to delay needed upgrades that leave families vulnerable to contamination, or substantially raise water rates to cover costs. This could make it even harder for Wisconsin families to pay their utility bills, a particularly concerning prospect when those same families are the ones facing contamination-related health costs.

Using the \$4 billion surplus, we urge you to make a substantive investment in our drinking water infrastructure. Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. **Support \$953 Million for Our Public Water Infrastructure.** The Safe Drinking Water Loan Program and the Clean Water Fund Program provide affordable financial assistance to municipalities for drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure projects that protect public health and ensure compliance with state and federal standards. These are low-interest, revolving loan programs with some allowances for principal forgiveness based on community need and wealth. While they are receiving a boost in funding from the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, it is not nearly enough. EPA estimates Wisconsin will need \$11.75 billion in water infrastructure investments over the next 20 years.¹¹ However, given the local government levy limit and municipal debt limit constraints, communities are hesitant to take on additional debt. Investing grant money into our revolving loan programs will save us money in the long-term by preventing negative health impacts, and supporting more green stormwater infrastructure projects which mitigate costly flooding and improve water quality.¹² We urge you to match the funding coming into these programs from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law by supporting at least \$953 million in water infrastructure grant funding for the 2025-27 biennium.
2. **Support Policy Changes That Protect Private Well Owners.** Approximately one-third of Wisconsinites rely on groundwater from private wells for their drinking water. The Safe Drinking Water Act has no jurisdiction over groundwater standards and therefore provides no protection or financial support for these Wisconsinites. Additionally, Wisconsin's mechanism for setting health-based standards is broken, constrained by 2017 Wisconsin Act 57. This legislation prevents Wisconsin decision makers from finalizing public health-based standards based on their health and economic benefits.¹³ These barriers are evidenced by the Department of Natural Resources inability to finalize nearly 50 standards.¹⁴ We urge you to remove 2017 Wisconsin Act 57 as a barrier to protecting our communities.
3. **Support Preventative Action.** We cannot afford to continue poisoning our water, cleaning it up, and repeating that cycle. Preventing these contaminants from getting into our environment better protects the people we love, and saves us money on our utility bills. We urge you to support phasing out the use of PFAS in non-essential consumer products as several states have already done, allowing local rental inspection programs that ensure apartments are free from lead, and funding pay-for-performance programs that reward hard-working farmers who effectively prevent nitrate contamination.

We owe it to every Wisconsinite to address the unfulfilled promises of the Safe Drinking Water Act and to deliver long overdue relief to communities impacted by contaminants like PFAS, lead, and nitrate. We welcome any opportunity to work with you to help make it happen.

⁸ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37213870/>

⁹ <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/getting-lead-out-health-benefits-ib.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10661-020-08652-0>

¹¹ https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-09/Seventh%20DWINSA_September2023_Final.pdf

¹² <https://www.seagrant.wisc.edu/our-work/focus-areas/coastal-communities/green-infrastructure/>

¹³ <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2017/related/acts/57>

¹⁴ <https://www.wpr.org/news/wisconsin-dnr-backlog-groundwater-standards-pfas>

Thank you,

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