#wish4waterWI

You can't live on a river and not know when something is wrong.

Groundwater Pumping

A trip down Interstate 39 through the very center of Wisconsin isn't known for memorable vistas of rugged canyons and craggy buttes. The landscape of that region of the state, known as the Central Sands, is flat as a door and undramatic. Belying the quiet features of this gentle land is an emerging water crisis.

Look for the telltale signs of how this land is used and the water that supports it. There are the long, robot-like arms of big irrigation rigs crawling in arcs across fields, watering the highly valuable crops that grow in the region's sandy soils. And there is the occasional crop-dusting plane zooming low over vast fields of potatoes, sweet corn, peas and beans.

This sandy land would be unproductive without the glaciers' gift of the trillions of gallons of groundwater lying just underneath those sandy soils and the crops they sustain. But a closer look reveals more clues to the impending water crisis. Tucked away are small, quiet lakes and, wending their way like small veins across this landscape, are clear, cold streams. The groundwater that feeds these water bodies is the very same water the farmers draw from to irrigate their crops.

As the sprinklers go on (each rig pumping tens of millions of gallons per summer every year), the lake levels go down – so much so that in some Central Sands lakes, the water level is now 20 or 30 yards away from the established shoreline. One lake, Long Lake, has been almost completely dried up for several years; trees now grow in the middle of the lake where people used to fish for bass. Sections of the Little Plover River have dried up over the past several growing seasons, and the river was named one the country's 10 Most Endangered Rivers by American Rivers in 2013.

Though scientists have made the link between groundwater pumping for irrigation and the depletion of nearby lakes and streams, farmers have been very reluctant to acknowledge that their pumping is the cause. Unquestioned and unfettered access to groundwater has been the tradition in the region, and there are nearly 2,500 so-called "high-capacity wells," each extracting at least 100,000 gallons per day in the growing season in the four counties that comprise the Central Sands. Hundreds more wells are added every year, and (with few exceptions) there is no limit on how much water one well can pump.

The piers in these pictures of Pine Lake (top) and Huron Lake (bottom) used to be in the water. The lake levels have been drastically reduced due to pumping by area high capacity wells.

Area residents who own lakeshore property or who care about the survival of streams like the Little Plover River have organized the Central Sands Water Action Coalition. The coalition's purpose is to raise the profile of this threat to the health and integrity of Central Sands surface waters, and to urge lawmakers to take action to protect the water for all uses and all people for the future.

While the coalition helped push back harmful groundwater legislation earlier in 2014, they fully expect defenders of the water-exploiting status quo to push for even looser regulations on groundwater pumping moving forward – to the continued detriment of the area's lakes, rivers and streams.

Barb Gifford

Barb Gifford and the Little Plover River go way back. Not as long as she and her husband of 52 years, but darn close. The Giffords built their house on the banks of the Little Plover, raised three children there and now play with their grandchildren there. When sections of the Little Plover River first ran dry in 2005, Barb Gifford – a long-time advocate and supporter in matters concerning the river – was shocked, sad, angry -- and spurred into action. Barb knew something was terribly wrong, and knew she had to fight to save the river that has been such an integral part of her family and her community.

The Little Plover River is one of the most studied rivers in the country because it has no tributaries – it is fed only by groundwater – providing an incredible amount of data from which to study how groundwater feeds the river. One could assume that pumping changed the groundwater levels, and that pumping was the primary culprit for drying up parts of the Little Plover River. The data proved it.

Having owned three separate successful businesses over the course of her career, Barb is not one to back down from a challenge. She gathered an abundance of information – including a 1997 report citing the risk posed to the Little Plover of adding more and more high-capacity wells. Barb and a small group of concerned citizens formed the Friends of the Little Plover River. The group's influence and effectiveness has grown significantly as they strive to educate people about the seriousness of groundwater issues in the watershed of the Little Plover

River and throughout Portage County. (More groundwater is used in Portage County than any other county in the state.)

For eight years the Friends of the Little Plover River has planned educational programs for local school children to learn how to become stewards of the river; hosts a Water Appreciation Day and many other community events and outreach; and serves as a clearinghouse for news and information about the challenges to this unique river. Among many other things, Gifford and her husband maintain the group's website to keep the flow of information current.

Having observed the life cycle of the river over four decades, Barb knows the Little Plover. "You can't live on a body of water and not know when something is wrong," she says. "People always think all we need is rain. Well, we've had rain and yet the Little Plover River continues to have reduced flows 70% of the time. As long as we allow more and more high-capacity wells to deplete our groundwater, the Little Plover River - in fact, all of our lakes and rivers - remain at risk."