

Lawmakers mull high-capacity well bill

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MADISON - Several central Wisconsin lawmakers say they aren't ready yet to support a bill that would ease regulation of high-capacity wells, which research has shown is linked to declining water levels in the region's lakes and streams.

Earlier this month, a group of GOP legislators introduced a measure in the state Senate to allow owners of high-capacity wells to repair and transfer such wells without getting approval from the state Department of Natural Resources. Anyone seeking to construct or operate a high-capacity well must currently get the DNR to sign off first.

The legislation, Senate Bill 76, would also allow a high-capacity well owner to replace or reconstruct high-capacity wells under certain circumstances without additional approval, although owners would still have to notify the DNR when wells are replaced, reconstructed or transferred, according to an analysis by the state Legislative Reference Bureau.

High-capacity wells, which can draw more than 100,000 gallons of water per day, have become a key issue in a broader statewide debate about how best to manage and protect water resources.

That is especially so in the Central Sands region of Wisconsin — covering sections of Wood, Portage, Marathon, Adams, Marquette, Waupaca and Waushara counties — which has seen a surge in the number of high-capacity wells in the past six decades.

State Rep. Scott Krug, R-Nekoosa, said Monday that he doesn't support the legislation in its current form and is planning to offer two amendments to the Assembly version of the bill, which has not yet been introduced.

The first amendment would seek to ensure that when wells are transferred, they don't draw more water than previously used. The amendment would cap the amount of water a well can pump to its "historical high use," which Krug defined as the most amount of water withdrawn over the course of a growing season. That amount, he said, will still likely be substantially lower than the maximum withdrawal amount allowed by the DNR under a well's original permit.

The amendment "gives farmers certainty to know how much they can use," Krug said. "It gives the public certainty to know how much is going to come out. So I think it's a win-win on both sides."

Krug's other amendment would address an element of the bill that requires the DNR to study the hydrology in parts of nine counties in central and eastern Wisconsin, including Wood, Portage and Adams counties. Krug said he wants to expand that area to include the entire Central Sands region.

Krug said he also would like high-capacity well owners to disclose more information to the DNR when transferring wells, such as the intended use and amount of water that would be drawn by the new owner.

Rep. Katrina Shankland, D-Stevens Point, has voiced concerns with the legislation, too. She said the bill might not allow the DNR to periodically review the effect of high-capacity wells on water levels, and she expressed dismay that the legislation doesn't specifically address problems faced by homeowners who have private wells.

"I'm also very concerned by the study that the bill authors are proposing, which singles out navigable waters like lakes, rivers and streams but completely ignores the impact of high-capacity well withdrawals on actual

groundwater levels,” Shankland said. “While our lakes and streams are of grave concern, any private well owner whose well has run dry will tell you that there is much more at stake.”

State Sen. Patrick Testin, R-Stevens Point, said in a statement that he’s still gathering feedback on the legislation’s “potential effects from constituents, stakeholders and scientists.”

But state Rep. John Spiros, R-Marshfield, supports the measure, which he called “common sense.”

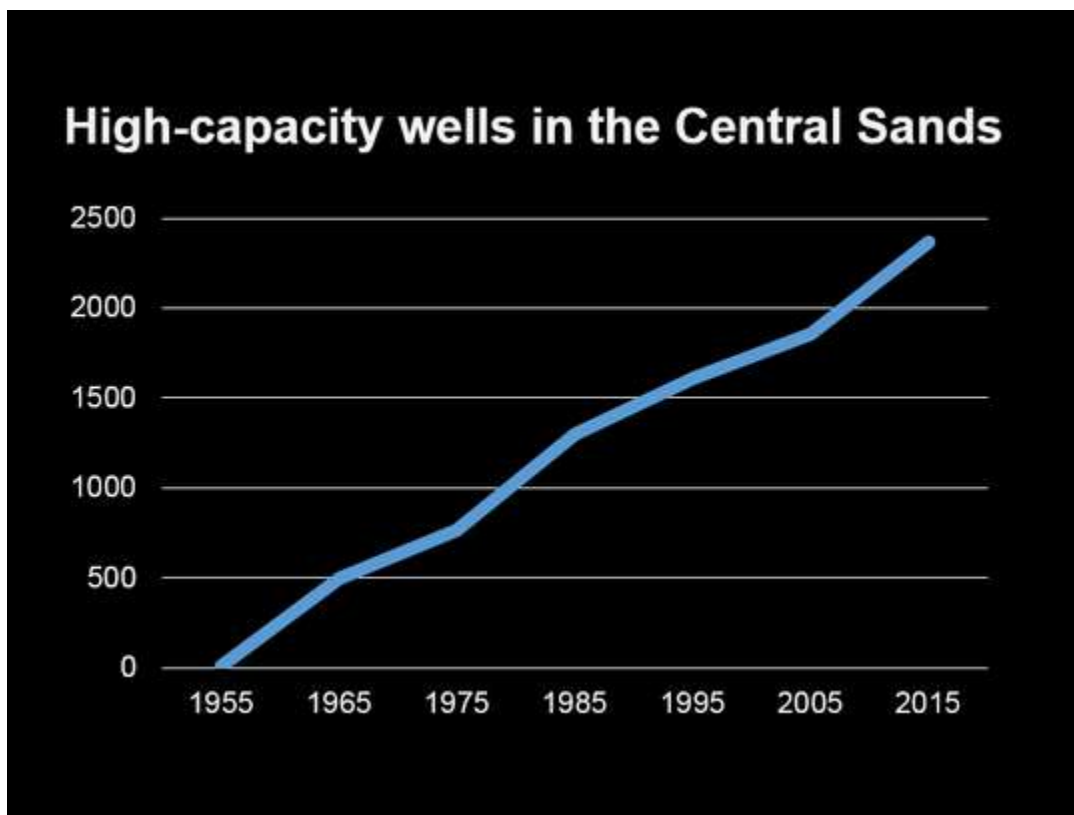
"This isn't talking about new wells," Spiros said. "It's talking about existing wells. I think it's common sense that you shouldn't have to go through the process again if something has to be done with the well."

Fueling the growth of high-capacity wells in the Central Sands has largely been agriculture, which uses the wells to irrigate crops, according to University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point professor George Kraft, who heads the university's Center for Watershed Science and Education.

One example: The proposed Golden Sands Dairy in Saratoga would have 5,300 cows and as many as 33 high-capacity wells, most of which would be used to irrigate about 4,100 acres of cropland.

Research has linked groundwater pumping to dry-ups of lakes and streams in the region, Kraft has previously said.

A government study last year on the Little Plover River in Portage County, which has run dry at times, found the waterway is inextricably linked to groundwater systems and “vulnerable to impacts from nearby pumping.” The study further found that pumping and land changes “have altered the natural groundwater flow pattern.”



(Illustration by Jonathan Anderson. Data courtesy of the Center for Watershed Science and Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point)