

# Bill Berry: GOP politicians ignore science on high-capacity wells

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The boat launch at Long Lake, near Plainfield, no longer reaches the water. In Wisconsin's Central Sands, some lakes and streams have lowered or dried up in recent years as the number of high-capacity wells has mushroomed, largely for irrigation. Kate Golden/Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism

STEVENS POINT — The Republican legislators rushing to push through groundwater legislation in Madison will go down in history for many reasons, but not for representing the interests of the people. They are to be pitied, even though they strut about in defiance of the voices calling for fairness.

When they are dead and gone, their legacy will be one of serving moneyed special interests at the expense of a fragile resource. Their children will have to live with this sordid past.

By granting perpetual high-capacity well pumping permits to powerful agricultural interests, they are setting up a Western-style water rights system that has failed miserably. They ignore the fact that excessive irrigation always leads to water-supply problems.

In doing so and as is the custom today, they will be ignoring good science. The science they are ignoring is not the science of the often-maligned UW-Stevens Point hydrologist George Kraft, whose work is irrefutable unless you choose to, well, ignore the facts. No, the science they now refute is that of the U.S. Geological Survey and the Wisconsin Natural History Survey, research that has been peer-reviewed and published even as the legislators scramble to do the bidding of powerful forces. It

is research that the state helped pay for, as did the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers, primarily because they wouldn't accept Kraft's work. The new research shows that current ground water pumping does indeed and has impacted surface waters in the so-called Central Sands region. Further, it says there are ways to mitigate the impacts and still meet the needs of irrigators in a sustainable manner.

But the science was ignored. Instead, the growers came up with some "facts" of their own, such as that tree plantations were causing the water depletion. This gave the lawmakers what they needed, and the march toward this sorry moment was on.

In their haste, they are ignoring the voices of thousands who have objected to unsustainable water extraction — voices from throughout the region and beyond. They are the voices of people of all political stripes, people whose wells have been impacted, people who own lakeside and vacation properties and who have watched their property values decline as their docks are stranded on dry land. These people have organized, written letters, attended scores of meetings and informational sessions, testified before legislative committees, and in general conducted themselves as citizens should in a democracy. But the doors are being slammed in their faces.

Maybe we don't have a democracy at all anymore. If we did, there would be some sort of reasonable compromise here, as when Wisconsin lawmakers in the 1980s fashioned a groundwater quality bill that wasn't perfect but stood the test of time.

Even as the lawmakers rush to accomplish their sordid legacy, the Department of Natural Resources has been approving new high-capacity permits. In one case, new permits would lead to flow reductions of around 10 percent to a tributary of the Tomorrow River here in central Wisconsin, one of the state's most beloved trout streams. Some in the agricultural sector are heard to say "Not all rivers and lakes are created equal." Where does that put the Tomorrow River?

Let's be clear about this: the aquifer beneath the Central Sands is vast. There's plenty of water, and it would take pumping of enormous proportions to dry it up. That is not and never has been the point. The point is that excessive pumping of the kind being rushed into law today impacts surface waters at the top of the aquifer.

The children of today's lawmakers will have to live with their parents' legacies. They'll be left to answer the age-old question: What were they thinking?

