

## Wisconsin State Journal - Editorial - 01/22/02

### State runoff rules need federal boost

Here's the first question that should be asked by the state Natural Resources Board at today's meeting on proposed runoff control rules: Where do supporters of these rules expect to find the \$65 million per year needed to pay for them?

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They won't find the cash in this state budget or the next. Like most other state agencies, the Department of Natural Resources is about to lose a chunk of its funding for the fiscal year beginning July 1. When the state has a budget deficit of \$1.1 billion, proposals to create \$65 million per year programs get laughed out of the Capitol - unless they come paired with ideas on how to save a comparable amount of money elsewhere.

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Seven hundred pages long and more than five years in the making, the runoff rules were written by the DNR and the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. The rules will require farmers to manage their lands and their livestock so that runoff into lakes and streams is reduced. In addition, the rules set standards for controlling runoff from urban areas such as golf course and construction sites.

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The rules are costly mainly because farmers must be paid to offset their costs for installing and maintaining conservation practices. As the rules are written, farmers will not be subject to the regulations unless the state pays for at least 70 percent of their costs.

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Supporters seem to recognize the state won't be the primary source of cash. That's realistic. But they're banking on federal conservation dollars to fill the gap. That's only realistic if Congress passes a 2002 Farm Bill that dramatically reforms farm subsidies to help conservation-minded states such as Wisconsin.

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The debate over a five-year farm bill is a study in worn-out and fresh approaches. The old way is to focus on subsidies to crop farmers. The bill passed by the House of Representatives took that route and increased payments to grain and oilseed farmers. That's a mistake because such subsidies create a cycle that is costly to taxpayers. The subsidies encourage overproduction, which lowers prices, which makes farmers more dependent on the subsidies. It also encourage the kind of "fence row-to-stream bank" farming that leads to runoff and water pollution.

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The Senate may still be persuaded to focus Farm Bill spending on conservation programs. Many senators and the Bush administration want to improve erosion and pollution control and increase wildlife habitat while spreading farm payments to more (usually smaller) farmers. Such an approach could conserve more fragile land and curtail overproduction.

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If the Natural Resources Board wants its runoff rules to work, it should urge Wisconsin's congressional delegation to join with other farm-state delegations to pass a 2002 Farm Bill that stresses conservation. Otherwise, Wisconsin will find itself with 700 pages of bureaucracy and no way to pay for it.

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