

OP/ED

May 5, 2003

Budget Cuts Endanger Rural Drinking Water Supplies

On May 1, 2003, the Joint Finance Committee passed a motion that may endanger drinking supplies for rural families. Introduced by Representative Ward and Senator Harsdorf, the motion significantly reduces the authority of the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to protect rural drinking water from agricultural chemical contamination.

Under the Joint Finance Committee's motion, if a company spills or dumps agricultural chemicals, DATCP will not be able to take samples of water, soil or plants to determine the extent and severity of the contamination unless:

- DATCP has "probable cause" to believe the contamination exists; and
- There is money available to pay for a contamination claim; or
- DATCP determines that the contamination poses a significant risk to human health.

It requires DATCP to make a determination of probable cause and human health risk without allowing the agency to collect the very information that it needs to make that finding. This is like requiring a police officer to determine that someone is speeding prior to being able to use the radar equipment.

How will DATCP know contamination exists, if it has not been able to take water and soil samples to determine the extent and significance of the contamination?

The Joint Finance Committee's motion will limit DATCP's ability to respond when there may have been a chemical spill that is seeping into the drinking supply of unsuspecting neighbors.

This is a policy decision that should not be tucked away in the state budget. As has been typical in recent Wisconsin history, the budget has become a vehicle for substantive policy measures. Governor Doyle has repeatedly stated that he will not misuse the budget process in this way. If this reaches Governor Doyle, we hope that he will veto this as a non-fiscal policy matter that has no place in the budget.

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