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Strategy aims to protect state's waters Committee gives report to Doyle

By Bill Novak
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Protecting and sustaining Wisconsin's waters should be a priority now and for future generations, a new report says, with the governor, Legislature and American Indians working as one to develop a comprehensive state water policy.

The Waters of Wisconsin report, being presented today to Gov. Jim Doyle, outlines the strategy that a committee of professionals, educators and environmentalists will use to guarantee "for this generation and future generations a safe and plentiful supply of water to meet essential human needs, to strive toward efficient use and environmentally responsible management of our waters and to ensure the resilience, viability and beauty of Wisconsin's watersheds and aquatic ecosystems."

Former Gov. Scott McCallum declared 2003 the "Year of Water" in Wisconsin, a commitment Doyle reaffirmed when he took office.

The committee brought more than 700 people together last October for a two-day conference - a "pep rally" of sorts - at the Monona Terrace Convention Center.

"People love their waters," said Stephen Born, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who co-chairs the committee. "This love, one of the main things that came out of our forum, moves the water issue out of the realm of scientists and gets to your psyche, your core values, your ethics."

The report recommends a general review of water education in Wisconsin with special attention given to assessing K-12 water education programs and needs, as well as expansion and coordination of volunteer water quality monitoring programs via the state's Department of Natural Resources.

Cooperation and dedication toward a singular water policy will be key, the report says.

To that end, the committee is recommending the establishment of the Wisconsin Water Policy Task Force, a broad-based coalition that would examine all major topics related to water use, management and protection, and would address the long-term and cumulative impacts of current policies.

Born told The Capital Times that water must be a priority for the state.

"This is the year," he said, "not just to celebrate our waters but to get everyone involved."

According to the report, the water policy task force should:

Compile an inventory of the main elements of current statutory, administrative

and other policies pertaining to water.

Identify and assess gaps, conflicts, duplications and weaknesses in the existing policy framework.

Identify scientific data, sources and additional information and monitoring needs on which Wisconsin can base effective water policy.

Provide a clear statement of future directions and a general policy framework to ensure a sustainable water future for the state.

Develop specific recommendations for the modification of statutes and other needed reforms.

Assess needs associated with water education.

Committee co-chair Patricia Leavenworth, state conservationist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said no cost estimate was made in the report, but the costs shouldn't be prohibitive if phased in and if resources are shared and leveraged.

Addressing Wisconsin's water issue is a long-term, continuing process that needs to be recognized as a fundamental goal, the report says.

"We can begin to act on recognition of the connections that characterize water, between the waters of the atmosphere, surface waters and ground water, between human uses and ecosystem needs, between water quality and quantity, between Wisconsin and our neighbors, between our generation and generations to come," the report concludes.

"Recognizing those connections, we can better prepare the way for future stewards."

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