Defending our lakes from more pollution

Threats of rollback keep coming

With another summer of memories at Wisconsin’s lakes put away in our photo albums, what will we remember? That long afternoon on July Fourth, spending time at a nearby park, the weekend canoe trip up north, or the algae and weeds that crept over our favorite swimming holes as the weeks wore on?

Our lakes are beautiful, but too many of them suffer from runoff pollution that chokes them with algae, especially later in the summer—and this year has been no exception. What’s worse, some of our state leaders spent the summer trying to roll back the very protections meant to keep our lakes swimmable and fishable.

In 2008, state lawmakers wisely decided to cut the phosphorus pollution that threatens our lakes. And last summer, our statewide citizen outreach campaign built up enough public support to help win another victory—strong rules to reduce the amount of polluted water that runs into our lakes from farms and cities, and is the number one cause of pollution in our lakes.

They won’t quit

But this year, Gov. Scott Walker has made it his mission to roll back those protections, making the case that Wisconsin can wait to deal with our pollution problems and let our lakes grow more toxic by the year. At the same time, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed three separate measures attacking the Environmental Protection Agency’s ability to protect waters all across the country. Together, these proposals pose a huge threat to our lakes, our ability to enjoy them, and their ability to provide drinking water and habitat.

This spring, we called Gov. Walker out on his shortsighted proposal. Into the summer, we spoke face to face with thousands of Wisconsinites, and we got more than 10,000 people to sign a petition demanding protections for our lakes. Public outcry from all corners of the state made leaders reluctant to be seen rolling back protections for our lakes.

Unfortunately, we know that the attacks will keep coming. That’s why we’ll be making the case in Madison and Washington, D.C., in the fall and winter months, working directly with lawmakers who want to protect our waters and keeping public pressure on those who don’t.

action

Our citizen outreach team takes a break from speaking with Wisconsinites in Green Bay.

To take action to protect our lakes, visit: www.WisconsinEnvironment.org/action
Recent action

Report: beach closings tallied up
When Wisconsinites flock to the beach during the summer months, some are safer destinations than others—and the problem seemed to get worse in 2010. In fact, the number of beach closings or advisories across the state jumped by 83 percent last year, to 735. In its 21st annual Testing the Waters report, the Natural Resources Defense Council analyzed government data on beachwater testing results at more than 3,000 locations nationwide.

A few of Wisconsin’s beaches received strong marks when compared to the nation’s most popular beaches: For example, North Beach in Racine and Baileys Harbor Ridges Park in Door County received four stars out of five. At the other end of the spectrum, two of our state’s beaches made it onto the top ten “repeat offenders” list: Eichelman Park Beach in Kenosha County and South Shore Park Beach in Milwaukee. Both were rated as two of the most consistently poor-quality beaches in the country. The report cites pollution from stormwater runoff and sewage overflows as the major contributors and recommends better practices for reducing runoff pollution.

Mercury rules delayed again
This spring, the Environmental Protection Agency took major steps to cut toxic air pollution from power plants, despite intense opposition from industrial polluters and their allies in Congress. The EPA proposed the first-ever nationwide limits on mercury pollution from power plants—limits that would cut mercury pollution by 91 percent, a huge victory given mercury’s effects on how kids think, learn and behave.

Polluters and their allies in the Senate fought back. Unfortunately, Wisconsin’s own Sens. Herb Kohl and Ron Johnson signed on to a bill in early August that would delay the EPA’s ability to impose such limits by more than three years. We joined our national federation in calling on the U.S. Senate to oppose the dangerous proposal, instead of giving polluters a free pass to spew toxic air pollution.
From the first pint of strawberries in June, to the juicy tomatoes of summer, down to the last crisp red apple of a Midwest fall, the abundance of a farmers market is unrivaled. But fresh food that’s been grown close to home shouldn’t only be found on a special trip to the market.

Though there are now 227 farmers markets across the state—from Madison’s yearlong fixture, to Milwaukee, to Eau Claire—much more remains to be done to expand Wisconsinites’ access to fresh, local food. That’s why this summer, Wisconsin Environment joined a nationwide coalition of groups working to make sure local farms can provide their communities with safe, fresh, delicious food.

A system of pollution
We should be doing everything we can to encourage healthy food and responsible farming. Unfortunately, too much of the food we buy in the supermarket comes from factory farms that pollute our lakes with runoff and pollute our air by trucking food to all corners of the country. And the U.S. House recently voted to continue sending billions of dollars in subsidies to those huge farms, while eliminating a program that supports small, sustainable farms.

In Wisconsin, polluted runoff is the number one cause of algae blooms in our lakes. Across the country, runoff and spills contribute to massive fish kills and unsafe swimming and fishing conditions. Much of this pollution comes from massive factory farms, which house thousands of cows each and spray huge amounts of pesticides on their fields.

Wisconsin Environment has worked hard to protect our lakes from pollution in Madison and in towns statewide, by mobilizing our members to tell elected officials that they care about clean water. While cracking down on the farms that pollute is important, we have much to gain by promoting local, sustainable farms.

More local food, not less
Though the U.S. House disappointingly voted against programs to help small farmers, the U.S. Senate, with the leadership of Wisconsin Sens. Herb Kohl and Ron Johnson, can restore those programs and get small farmers the help they need to expand.

Over the summer, we spoke with Wisconsinites about locally grown food and built the momentum we’ll need to take this campaign into the fall. In the coming months, we’ll make sure that the issue stays in the media and continue talking to people around the state. Together, we’ll show lawmakers that Wisconsinites want the fresh, local food we associate with farmers markets to be accessible enough to include in every meal.

Plug into clean energy
Efficiency is the cheapest and cleanest way to cut our fossil fuel use and pollution. It seems intuitive enough: Use less energy. Save fuel, and save money.

But with the numerous federal, state and local organizations and agencies ready to help you retrofit your home or business, offering rebates, discounts, financing and other kinds of incentives, it can be tough to figure out where to start.

Wisconsin Environment Research & Policy Center designed our “Plug Into Clean Energy” guide to help you cut through the clutter and pick what works for you, so you can get on the path toward a more efficient home or business, one step at a time.

Here are five low- to no-cost things you can do right now to cut your energy use:

1. Replace incandescent light bulbs with CFLs to cut your lighting costs by up to 75 percent.
2. Wash your laundry using cold water only.
3. Plug appliances into power strips, and turn them off when not in use.
4. Put aluminum foil behind radiators to reflect heat back into the room.
5. Scrape—rather than rinse—dishes, and only run the dishwasher when you have a full load.

For the full list, visit www.WisconsinEnvironment.org/center/plug-into-clean-energy
Going the distance for 60-mpg cars

In July, an ExxonMobil pipeline spilled more than 42,000 gallons of oil into Montana’s pristine Yellowstone River. Now, according to one nearby resident, “You go down to where the oil is, and you don’t hear anything anymore. No birds, no toads, no crickets, nothing.”

In the wake of the latest spill, Wisconsin Environment stepped up our work in a national effort to get America off of oil—by making our cars more fuel-efficient, building strong public transportation systems, and investing in electric vehicles. We mobilized more than 10,000 people across the country to push for a 60-mpg fuel standard that will ensure our cars go farther on a tank of gas, and we’ve made big progress. In August, the Obama administration announced the single biggest policy ever enacted to get our nation off oil: a standard that requires a fleetwide gas mileage average of 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025. If we’d had that standard this summer, the average Wisconsinite would have saved $532 on gasoline.

Our federal global warming director, Nathan Willcox (center), thanks President Obama for the new 54.5-mpg fuel standard. If this standard had been in place this summer, the average Wisconsin household would have saved $532 on gas.