Defending our lakes from pollution

New protections face threat of rollback

Summertime: the months when Wisconsinites spend as much time as possible swimming and fishing in our beautiful lakes. It’s also the time of year when we get frequent reminders that too many of them are polluted, choked with algae and weeds caused by runoff that washes into our waters from farms, cities and construction sites.

Our campaign last summer to protect our lakes from this pollution was a big success. Not only did we get tens of thousands of people across the state talking, we got thousands involved, and we won: By the fall, strong new rules to protect our lakes had been approved, and we had high hopes for the future of lakes all across the state. We had hoped that by this time this summer, we’d be working with state leaders to make clean water a priority, and supporting them in enacting the new protections as strongly as possible. Unfortunately, that isn’t the case.

A step backward? Not only have our new governor and state Legislature chosen not to make clean water a priority—they’re also proposing to give polluters a free pass. Gov. Scott Walker has proposed a budget that cuts off resources for implementing the rules to protect our lakes, potentially stopping last year’s progress before our lakes can even benefit from it. He has also called for a two-year delay before enforcing phosphorus standards that help prevent algae blooms—standards we won with the help of our members two years ago.

Our lakes deserve better than this. Wisconsinites have spoken, and it is clear that we love our lakes enough to protect them. This summer, we’re working to protect our lakes from attacks by polluters and their allies.

Standing strong for our lakes

Once again, we’ll be going door to door, talking to people on the street, organizing our members via email, and building the groundswell of public support we need to show state leaders that Wisconsin’s lakes deserve strong protections.

Runoff pollution causes 90 percent of the algae blooms we see choking our lakes in the summer.

To take action, visit www.WisconsinEnvironment.org
**Recent action**

**2010 was breakthrough year for solar**

In an otherwise lackluster economy the solar industry shined brighter than ever before in 2010, with a 67 percent increase in the amount of solar energy projects installed across America compared to 2009.

That means more homes and businesses powered by pollution-free solar energy, an increase made possible by strong solar policies implemented at the urging of Wisconsin Environment. In December, federal Clean Energy Advocate Sean Garren led our charge in Congress to extend critical incentives for solar power.

Wisconsin Environment, along with the rest of the Environment America federation, continues to strategize with entrepreneurs within the solar industry to hit a far more ambitious benchmark: getting 10 percent of our nation’s energy from solar by 2030.

**President pushes for conservation funding**

Margie Alt, the director of our national federation, joined President Obama at the White House in February for his announcement that he’d seek the renewal of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

What’s the Land and Water Conservation Fund? For the past forty-five years the federal government has put a fraction of the revenue from offshore drilling into a trust fund to expand national parks, protect hunting and fishing areas, and aid local conservation and recreation projects like city parks and playing fields.

In 2010, the Land and Water Conservation Fund spent money protecting important natural places in Wisconsin including the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge and the Ice Age National Scenic Trail.

Our staff is currently building support for the approval of the conservation funding in Congress.
For a healthy future, update the Clean Air Act

There’s no doubt that the Clean Air Act, which turned 40 in 2010, has improved the health and well-being of millions of Americans. Its protections are credited with saving the lives of 160,000 Americans in 2010 alone.

Of course, air pollution remains a pressing health threat in this country, a stark reminder of the work still left to do. In 2010, 13,200 Americans lost their lives as a result of heart attacks, strokes, asthma attacks and other fatal conditions brought on or exacerbated by air pollution from power plants. It’s estimated that one in six women of childbearing age has enough mercury in her bloodstream (a byproduct of coal power production) to put her child at risk should she become pregnant.

Thankfully, the Obama administration has announced it will seek to strengthen and update portions of the Clean Air Act in the coming months.

An assault on our health

With some vocal opponents of the Clean Air Act throwing their weight around in Congress, Wisconsin Environment, along with our national federation Environment America, the American Lung Association and other public health organizations are building support to make sure the administration’s proposals are put into practice.

In January, Wisconsin Environment Clean Energy Associate Scott Thompson released a hard-hitting examination of one of the most dangerous air pollutants: mercury. That report, “Dirty Energy’s Assault on our Health,” documented waterways that carry advisories warning against fish consumption due to mercury pollution, including Lake Michigan, Lake Monona and Lake Winnebago. According to the report, power plants in Wisconsin emitted 2,720 pounds of mercury pollution in 2009.

A taste of things to come?

The Obama administration’s updates to the Clean Air Act face great uncertainty, with polluting industries and their allies in Congress having launched an all-out assault on the Clean Air Act.

In February, the House of Representatives attached a provision to a federal funding bill that would have blocked the Environmental Protection Agency from cutting mercury pollution from cement plants, cleaning up soot pollution, and reducing carbon dioxide from coal-fired plants.

Less than a month later, the Senate rejected the funding bill, with many senators citing the environmental and public health attacks within the bill as one of the reasons for their opposition.

Yet, with some members of Congress still trying to block the EPA from doing its job protecting our air, Wisconsin Environment is continuing to work for clean air and a healthier future.

Is nuclear power worth the risk?

Our hearts go out to the people of Japan who, after seeing a massive earthquake and tsunami strike their country, were forced to contend with an escalating nuclear crisis.

At press time, the consequences were still unfolding: Drinking water samples in Tokyo were contaminated with radioactive iodine at a level dangerous to infants; the sale of a dozen types of produce from the Fukushima region were banned due to potentially dangerous levels of radioactivity; hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from the area around the reactors; and high radiation levels were found in the nearby ocean waters.

Should we be concerned about America’s 104 nuclear plants, especially the Point Beach plant in Two Rivers, posing similar risks to our children’s health and our environment? Based on our analysis, yes. At the most basic level, Mother Nature proved stronger than the best safeguards that Japan could design. Why would we be different?

Wisconsin Environment is urging the Obama administration and others to improve the safety of existing nuclear plants, declare a moratorium on new plants, and begin to responsibly phase out our use of nuclear power in favor of clean, renewable energy, like wind and solar power.

We’re also working to make sure that the existing moratorium on building new nuclear power plants in Wisconsin is kept in place.

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In April, Wisconsin Environment joined local fishermen and farmers to release a report that details the threats from factory farms and development to Wisconsin’s lakes. Among other findings, the report highlighted the rapid increase in the number of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), which has increased the threat of runoff pollution. The number of CAFOs in Wisconsin has increased 16-fold in the past 15 years, from 10 in 1995 to almost 160 in 2010.

At the event, a dairy farmer from Columbia County and trout fishermen used the report to call for better lakes protections. Runoff pollution contributes to the fact that 380,000 acres of Wisconsin’s lakes and reservoirs and more than 3,300 miles of streams and rivers are polluted and unfit for fishing, swimming and drinking water.

“The problem is getting worse,” said Wisconsin Environment Advocate Megan Severson. “Gov. Scott Walker’s proposal to allow more pollution in our lakes is unacceptable.”