Wisconsin Groundwater Coordinating Council (GCC) Meeting Minutes

Date: February 14, 2025 **Time:** 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM **Location:** Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, 2811 Agriculture Drive, Madison, WI (Board Conference Room 106) and via Zoom

1. Meeting Opening and Approval of Previous Minutes

- GCC Members Present: Steve Elmore (DNR), Brad Johnson (DSPS), Sue Swanson (WGNHS), Robby Personette (DATCP), Sheryl Bedno (DHS), Christy Remucal (UWS), Barry Paye (DOT)
- **Introductions and Agenda Review:** The meeting began with attendee introductions and a review of the agenda. No modifications were made.
- **Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes:** Motion to approve the November 8, 2024, meeting minutes by Brad Johnson, second Christy Remucal, approved by voice vote.

2. Joint Solicitation proposal review – Presented by Bill Phelps (DNR) and Jen Hauxwell (UWS)

The GCC supports an annual groundwater research and monitoring competition in partnership with UW's Water Resources Institute. Key partners include the DNR, DATCP, and DSPS, with other agencies welcome to contribute funding and participate. The 2024 request for proposals was released in late June, with \$290,000 available for funding. An informational webinar was held in September, and 15 proposals were submitted by the November 1st deadline.

The proposals covered a wide range of topics, including groundwater quality issues (PFAS, neonics, nitrates, microplastics, arsenic, antibiotics, radium) and groundwater quantity concerns (wetland recharge, surface-groundwater interactions). Social science proposals addressed perceived health risks, groundwater value, and source water protection.

A total of 26 investigators from eight institutions, including UW campuses, USGS, Wisconsin DNR, and Michigan Tech, participated. The total funding request for the first year was \$1.1 million, with nearly \$2 million requested over two years. Peer reviewers from around the world provided evaluations, with 55 external reviewers assessing the proposals. Most proposals were rated "very good" to "excellent."

The GCC Research and Monitoring Subcommittee provided 11 reviewers, including GCC agency staff and USGS experts, and conducted further assessments of submitted proposals, with 5-10 reviews per proposal. A meeting on January 17th was held to discuss scores and comments. The next step is for agencies, primarily DNR and UW System, to decide on funding allocations in coordination with the Groundwater Research Advisory Council. A meeting later today will finalize funding decisions to maximize impact across projects

3. Technical Presentation: An Evaluation of Atrazine Prohibition Areas and Their Impact on Groundwater Quality - Sam Brockschmidt (DATCP)

Sam Brockschmidt, hydrogeologist at DATCP, presented findings of a study that he conducted while being a UW- Fellow at DATCP. The study consisted of an in-depth evaluation of atrazine prohibition areas (PAs) to assess their effectiveness in improving groundwater quality. This analysis is crucial, as no comprehensive assessment has been conducted in over two decades.

Background

Atrazine is a widely used herbicide, particularly on corn crops in Wisconsin. However, due to its persistence in groundwater and potential health risks, atrazine prohibition areas were established starting in 1991 to mitigate contamination. Today, 101 PAs exist statewide.

Key Objectives of the Project

- 1. Evaluate the Effectiveness of Atrazine Prohibition Areas
 - Assess whether atrazine concentrations in groundwater have decreased since the establishment of prohibition areas.

2. Determine Eligibility for PA Repeal

• Analyze groundwater data to determine whether any PAs meet the repeal criteria outlined in Wisconsin Administrative Code ATCP 30.375(1-3).

3. Identify Data Gaps

• Pinpoint areas where additional groundwater sampling is necessary to gain a complete understanding of groundwater quality trends.

Findings

- Effectiveness of PAs:
 - 57 PAs appear to be effective in reducing atrazine contamination.
 - 42 PAs have insufficient data to determine effectiveness.
 - Two PAs show no improvement.
- Eligibility for PA Repeal:
 - \circ 38 PAs have met the criteria for repeal under ATCP 30.375(1) and (2).
 - 22 PAs could qualify for repeal within one year with additional sampling.
 - 41 PAs require more than a year of additional sampling to meet repeal criteria.
 - No PAs have yet satisfied ATCP 30.375(3), which requires a scientific study proving that renewed atrazine use would not cause contamination.
- PA Success Story: Crivitz, Marinette County
 - A PA established in 1995 following contamination at well FE017 showed a significant decline in atrazine levels over time.
 - Recent sampling of 20 wells within this prohibition area confirmed no exceedances of enforcement standards, demonstrating the PA's success in improving groundwater quality.

Future Steps

- Five additional PA sampling campaigns are planned for spring 2025.
- Comprehensive reporting on this study will be completed by mid-2025.

• Addressing data gaps remains a priority, though full statewide sampling at the required scale would take multiple decades at current resource levels.

Conclusion

Overall, atrazine prohibition areas appear to be largely effective in reducing contamination levels. However, more data is needed to fully assess and potentially repeal certain PAs. Continued groundwater monitoring and strategic sampling efforts will be essential in refining our understanding of atrazine's long-term impact on Wisconsin's water quality.

This study was conducted as part of a UW fellowship program. Jen Hauxwell, from the Wisconsin Sea Grant, discussed the importance of creating fellowship opportunities through partnerships between UW and state agencies. She emphasized that these collaborations bring in talented individuals to help address water-related challenges that agencies may not have the resources to fully tackle. Jen mentioned that she sometimes has seed funding available to support such partnerships and encouraged agencies to reach out with ideas for fellowship programs.

4. Technical Presentation: Intro to DNR's Office of Agriculture and Water Quality – Stacy Steinke (DNR)

Stacey Steinke provided an overview of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Office of Agriculture and Water Quality. Established in 2021, the office has recently expanded to a team of four, allowing for greater capacity to coordinate resources, drive science-based initiatives, and enhance stakeholder engagement. Unlike regulatory programs within the DNR, the office focuses on strategic planning, collaboration, and proactive problem-solving related to agriculture and water quality. Their work includes coordinating interagency policies, building connections with agricultural stakeholders, and addressing complex environmental challenges.

Key Initiatives and Updates

- Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy: Originally developed in 2013, Wisconsin's strategy is being updated with input from state and federal partners. The office is leading an extensive stakeholder engagement process, including informational webinars and listening sessions to gather feedback from the agricultural and conservation communities.
- Agricultural Best Management Practices (BMP) Assessment (Led by Karl Gesch in partnership with UW-Madison and UW Extension) Evaluates the effectiveness of BMPs in reducing nitrogen and phosphorus loss to surface and groundwater.
- Social Science Assessment (Led by Ken Genskow at UW-Madison) Identifies challenges and barriers to conservation practice adoption in Wisconsin.
- Regional and National Collaboration:
 - Participation in the Hypoxia Task Force, a coalition of 12 states, five federal agencies, and other partners working on nutrient reduction strategies in the Mississippi River Basin.

- Engagement with the Great Lakes Commission and the Great Lakes Sediment and Nutrient Reduction Program Task Force to address water quality issues in the Great Lakes Basin.
- Internal Nonpoint Source Program Assessment:
 - Conducted in response to stakeholder concerns regarding the state's slow progress toward water quality goals.
 - Involved 34 discussions with 88 staff and supervisors across multiple DNR programs.
 - Aims to improve internal collaboration, strengthen engagement with agricultural stakeholders, and accelerate progress on water quality objectives.

Closing Remarks

Stacey encouraged continued collaboration and invited attendees to reach out to the office for support on agriculture or water quality-related projects. A GovDelivery subscription is available for updates on the nutrient loss reduction strategy. Click <u>here</u> to subscribe.

5. Agency Updates

Each GCC agency and organization provided updates on recent activities, projects, and staffing changes impacting groundwater research, protection, and public health.

Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) – Robby Personette

Robbie provided updates on recent developments within the Environmental Quality Unit. He announced that Sam Brockschmidt, previously a fellow in partnership with UW, has joined the unit as a hydrogeologist. Robbie also reported that the Bureau of Agrichemical Management is transitioning from an outdated database to a modern, enterprise-wide system. Several program areas have already migrated, with full integration expected within the next year. Regarding ongoing projects, hydrogeologists within the Environmental Quality Unit are preparing to commence surface water and nonpoint groundwater sampling in March. Additionally, the groundwater and environmental quality teams are working with public information officers and digital communications specialists to develop social media content for the National Groundwater Awareness Week. This initiative aims to educate the public on groundwater and surface water usage in the state. Robbie noted that staff members will participate and present at the National Monitoring Conference in Green Bay from March 10-14. In terms of reporting, he shared that the 2024 Targeted Sampling Report has been finalized and posted alongside other nonpoint monitoring program reports on the Bureau's website. Additional reports, including the atrazine inspection and surface water reports, are currently in progress and expected to be published in the coming months. He also provided an update on the Bureau of Laboratory Services' partnership with the Environmental Quality Unit to expand pesticide screening capabilities. The number of analyzed pesticides is increasing from 112 to 115, with the addition of the following compounds: 4-hydroxychlorothalonil, imazamox, and imazapic. These chemicals are frequently

used in roadside spraying, and their increased presence is expected as municipalities adopt them to reduce mowing costs.

University of Wisconsin System (UWS) - Christy Remucal

Christy provided an update, highlighting the joint solicitation discussed earlier as the most significant development. She noted that uncertainty surrounding the federal budget process remains a major concern.

Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) – Brad Johnson

Brad provided noted that DSPS is currently in the budget development phase. He highlighted ongoing challenges with the Wisconsin Fund, a program designed to assist low-income families in replacing failing septic systems. The program sunsets unless specifically funded in each biennial budget, creating an inconsistent cycle that complicates grant implementation. Due to statutory timelines, the agency is required to consolidate grant periods into larger groupings, making the program somewhat disjointed. Despite these challenges, there is a proposal to secure funding, and Brad expressed hope that it would be included in the executive budget.

Brad also mentioned that this time of year is particularly busy with audits of county sanitary programs and a significant focus on continuing education. The agency recently held two virtual training sessions on soil analysis within the plumbing program. These sessions are free and available online, offering continuing education credits for applicable credentials. He encouraged anyone interested to reach out or visit the DSPS website for more information.

Department of Transportation (DOT) – Barry Payne

Barry noted that the mild winter has resulted in reduced salt usage, which is a positive development. He also mentioned that the environmental team is currently fully staffed, which is a good position to be in. Similar to what was shared earlier, Barry highlighted that much of their current focus is on incoming federal policies, which are creating uncertainty and delays in determining the direction of environmental policy.

Wisconsin State Geological and Natural History Survey (WGNHS) - Sue Swanson

Sue provided an update from the Survey, starting with the completion of submission deadlines for two key USGS funding programs: the State Map Program and the Data Preservation Program. She noted that the topics for these programs had been summarized in the previous meeting minutes and would not be revisited in detail. Looking ahead, Sue shared that they are considering expanding bedrock mapping from Dunn County into Barron County in northwest Wisconsin. This extension would take advantage of Eric Stewart's expertise in the geology of that region and provide valuable insights into the Eau Claire formation as an aquitard. The region is also experiencing significant population growth and has a high concentration of agricultural activities, particularly dairy and turkey farms, making this extension particularly relevant. Sue also highlighted the recent publication of the "Depth to Bedrock" data series for northeast Wisconsin, developed in collaboration with DATCP. This data supports NR 151 and ATCP 50 related to land spreading rules over thin soils and fractured bedrock. Sue mentioned that a new mapping status viewer is being developed to show the geographic footprint of bedrock, quaternary, and water table mapping across the state. This tool will make it easier to locate and access mapping data, linking directly to their publications database. Sue provided an update on the hiring of a new software engineer and web developer. Final interviews for this position were conducted this week, and they hope to have someone on board soon. This new hire will assist with the development of a data viewer for the well cuttings database, improving access to information on available cuttings not yet translated into geological logs.

Department of Health Services (DHS) - Cheryl Bedno and Sarah Yang

Cheryl provided an update from DHS, starting with a brief overview of their three-year biomonitoring project, which began on September 1st, 2024. This project is a collaboration between DHS, the Wisconsin State Lab of Hygiene, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and DATCP. The project is focused on monitoring pesticides and heavy metals, including arsenic and lead, in agricultural areas. The first advisory group meeting was held a few weeks ago, and the project has been progressing well. Cheryl expressed appreciation for the collaborative efforts of the group, as they continue to leverage expertise and build on their progress. Sarah then provided additional updates. She introduced the new groundwater toxicologist, Jordan Murray. Sarah also announced the addition of a new toxicologist for the site evaluation program, Jessica Parrott. Sarah further shared that DHS had sent their recommended groundwater standards for six PFAS to DNR earlier in the month. Information on these standards is now available on their groundwater standards page, and they are in the process of updating the online hazard index tool. The updates will allow users to more easily calculate the hazard index without the need for calculators or Excel spreadsheets, and the new version will be available soon. Sarah talked about the rebranding of their testing program, now called the Wisconsin Well Testing Access Program (WellTAP). This program provides well testing for individuals who are pregnant, have young children, or are health-compromised. Sarah mentioned that the program recently held a webinar for counties on how to implement the technical aspects of the program. She encouraged anyone with questions or challenges to reach out for assistance and shared that more samples are being collected, which is a positive development for the program.

Department of Natural Resources (DNR) – Steve Elmore

DNR provided updates, starting with rulemaking activities. The Waste Materials Management Program is updating its NR 500 series, which include landfill rules and groundwater monitoring requirements. These updates were recently approved by the Natural Resources Board. Additionally, DNR is working on NR 146, which involves well driller licensing, and NR 812, which pertains to pump installations. The public comment period for these rules will run from March 17th to April 22nd, with a public hearing scheduled for April 15th. DNR also shared that they are moving forward with changes to NR 140, groundwater standards related to PFAS, based on the recommendations they received from DHS. DNR will seek approval from the Natural Resources Board to hold a preliminary public hearing on the scope statement on February 23rd. In response to the new DHS recommendations, DNR has withdrawn the previous rulemaking on PFAS from 2022, which included outdated PFAS standards. DNR is drafting rules to incorporate new EPA PFAS Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs) into state law through NR 809. DNR has

received \$5 million in ARPA funds for well compensation and well abandonment programs. Applications are now being accepted, with some changes to eligibility, including the requirement for only one sample for non-bacterial contaminants such as PFAS, arsenic, or manganese. All funding awards must be completed by November of this year, with funds to be fully paid out by the end of 2026. On the PFAS front, DNR continues its efforts in the town of Stella/Starks area near Rhinelander. As of February 10th, 236 private wells in the area have been sampled for PFAS, with 32% exceeding the DHS health advisory of 20 ppt for PFOA and PFOS. Some wells had PFAS levels above the EPA's MCLs, and DNR is working to follow up with those households. In the public water system realm, 1,896 active systems have submitted PFAS compliance samples, with 30% showing PFAS detections. A few systems have exceeded both the DHS hazard index and the new EPA MCLs. DNR also continues its communication and engagement efforts through the PFAS Technical Advisory Group and External Advisory Group. The next external advisory group meeting is scheduled for February 21, 2025. Further, DNR has contracted with UW-Madison to assess agricultural best management practices as part of the nutrient loss reduction strategy. The interagency partners will kick off a broad stakeholder engagement process in the first half of 2025.