Factory farms cause thousands in rural Wisconsin to go without clean water

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25 April 2016

Rural northeastern Wisconsin residents are facing an ongoing drinking water crisis. Pollution from large-scale dairy farms known as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and the failure of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources have created unsafe drinking water for thousands in Kewaunee County.

Occupying part of the Door Peninsula on the shore of Lake Michigan, Kewaunee County is home to the largest concentration of dairy farm CAFOs in the state. The county is home to 15 farms housing 50,000 cows, with an additional 40,000 cows in smaller operations. Animal production is the county's second largest industry after manufacturing.

Tainted water across the state of Wisconsin has become a serious problem. Since 2013, 64 Wisconsin drinking water systems have tested over federal lead contamination limits. In rural Wisconsin, households use private wells where municipal water service and treatment is not available.

EPA data for 2016 indicates more than one-third of wells for Kewaunee County residents do not meet EPA safe drinking water standards. Test results from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh in 2014, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in 2015, and now the EPA in 2016, list nitrates and total coliform bacteria as the principal pollutants, meaning manure and fertilizer byproducts of industrial farming have entered the groundwater at toxic levels.

A network of different soils, gravel and rock purify water on its way to underground aquifers. Aquifers are the part of soil that holds water and sits on top of the bedrock. This process has been shortcut not only by a lack of topsoils from overworked farmlands, but also the massive amounts of nitrogen fertilizer and manure irresponsibly applied to the land.

Excess nitrogenous waste is soluble in rain and snow, leading to pollutants entering the water table untreated. The water table is the water held in the aquifer that all wells draw upon. The US Geological Survey reports, "In Wisconsin, 70% of residents and 97% of communities rely on groundwater as their drinking water source. Wisconsin has abundant quantities of high-quality groundwater, but once groundwater is contaminated, it's expensive and often not technically possible to clean." Such is the case in Waukesha County, Wisconsin, where radium contamination in the water table has created a technical and political quagmire.

The Wisconsin DNR is the state's regulatory authority for groundwater concerns. They issue permits for CAFOs, sand used in hydraulic fracturing and metal ore mining. Their legal authority in groundwater matters has been undermined through adverse decisions in a series of high-profile lawsuits against CAFOs, and they have failed to adequately monitor the riskiest groundwater operations in Wisconsin.

In late 2015 the DNR lost a lawsuit to monitor high capacity wells at a CAFO in central Wisconsin. These types of wells, common to large agricultural operations, use high-capacity water pumps to draw as much as 100,000 gallons of water per day. The household well pumps most Kewaunee County residents use draw only 100 gallons per day.

High-capacity wells are dangerous to groundwater quality because they draw water much faster than the natural replacement rate and allow pollutants to become concentrated in the water table. Monitoring wells are dug and data collected by the DNR to keep abreast of sudden changes in water table levels. There is only a single monitoring well for the entire county of Kewaunee.

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Farmers have traditionally recycled manure into natural fertilizer by spreading it on fields over the winter. This process allows slow absorption into the soil over months. However, the quantity of manure generated by CAFOs, over 1 billion gallons per year, is far beyond what arable lands can handle, and state regulation is completely inadequate to protect against nitrogen pollution of drinking water systems. CAFOs are allowed to write and sign off on their own manure management plans. The drive for profit and avoidance of regulatory scrutiny encourages more than just fraud, it becomes a criminal trespass against the social right of clean drinking water.

While the crash of 2007-2008 raised Kewaunee County unemployment rates to more than 10 percent, two-thirds of the jobs created in the "recovery period" are in dairy farms. Some $65 million of the county's economy is now in dairy farming, just under one-quarter of the total.

This agricultural pollution crisis is historically based on federal policy stemming from the Great Depression of the 1930s and, three decades later, the actions of a single USDA administrator, Earl Butz. A board member of several agribusiness corporations prior to his appointment in 1971 by Nixon to head the USDA, Butz was hostile to what he called the "socialism" of the New Deal, and this played out in dramatic policy changes.

Butz not only dismantled price supports and subsidies guaranteed to American farmers since the 1940s, he did away with payments to fallow (rest) fields, preventing soil from being overworked by intensive cultivation. He encouraged farmers to "go big or go home" by borrowing capital to expand their holdings. Reviving a largely untrammeled free market in agriculture created a glut of cheap corn and soy used for producing corn syrup and ethanol. The grain commodities bubble popped in the 1980s and farmers went broke or overextended their credit to expand, leading to further bankruptcies when commodity prices continued to fall.

This drop in the price of corn and soy created the opportunity not only for corporate consolidation of farms, but the creation of CAFOs. By 1998 the USDA returned to subsidies including direct payments to farmers. These payments are directed at supporting the top producers—the factory farms. The overworked soils remaining in much of the Midwest require increasingly large quantities of fertilizer, further advantaging agribusiness corporations. These economic relationships present a race to the bottom for environmental and human health.

The conditions in Kewaunee County, Wisconsin show that the deteriorating quality of drinking water is not limited to urban areas like Flint, Michigan, where industrial byproducts have led to widespread contamination by lead, copper and other toxins. Agribusiness is a capitalistic industry driven by the same profit considerations.

Groundwater is a social good which has been subverted to the profit motive globally. Capitalism is engaged in the destructive and wasteful use of natural resources worldwide. Treating the natural environment as purely a source of private gain has devastated water, air, soil, plant diversity and animal welfare.

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