



AN ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH TRACKING STORY

MOVING LOCAL NITRATE DATA TO FOCUSED RECOMMENDATIONS

La Crosse County, Wisconsin

THE PROBLEM

La Crosse County is home to approximately 7,000 private wells, 2,000 of which reside in the towns of Holland and Onalaska. In these two rural towns, about 30% of nearly 500 nitrate tests exceeded the recommended limit of 10 mg/L. La Crosse Health Department staff applied for Environmental Public Health Tracking funds to investigate the problem, collect additional data, and develop potential policy recommendations with their partners.

THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT'S SOLUTION

In fall 2017, health department staff hired a consultant to assess data on well construction and water quality testing in the towns of interest. He reviewed well depths, well types, land use activities, and groundwater flow to help explain why nitrate levels were high in about 30% of wells. To further explore the issue, staff convened a task force that included town residents as well as partners from the Land Conservation Division, UW-Extension, and city planning among others. The task force invited speakers to discuss how farming and septic systems impact groundwater, how groundwater flows, how nitrates can travel, and which policies and strategies might help mitigate nitrate contamination of groundwater.

After hearing from the speakers and discussing the topics as a group, the task force compiled a policy analysis that summarized potential policies and their anticipated outcomes. They presented their findings and [five policy recommendations](#) to the community and health board in October 2018.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACT

After reviewing the five recommendations, the health board decided to address the first recommendation: develop processes to inform current and potential residents of the nitrate contamination hazard through realtors, builders, and county and municipal governments. Health department staff have outlined activities to address this recommendation.

By convening a nitrate task force, La Crosse County Health Department was able to bring a variety of stakeholders to the table to discuss the issues, review existing literature, learn potential solutions, and collaboratively decide on recommendations to present to the health board. Their process maximized engagement and involved all stakeholders in the solution.

WISCONSIN ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH TRACKING PROGRAM

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dhs.wisconsin.gov/epht | FEBRUARY 2019 | dhstracking@wi.gov
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