

**ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER ACTION FUND
SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN POLL
NOVEMBER 2019**

In early November of 2019, Selzer & Company conducted a poll of 601 registered voters in five southwestern counties in Wisconsin: Crawford, Grant, Iowa, Lafayette, and Richland. The poll, conducted for the Environmental Law and Policy Center Action Fund, had several purposes:

- To find out the priority registered voters give to key public issues, including safe clean water;
- To find out how much voters know about water quality issues related to agriculture operations in this part of the state;
- To gauge support for and opposition to increasing regulations to ensure a safe clean water supply;
- To assess messages both for and against added regulations; and
- To understand how these issues might play in upcoming elections; and

The appendix lays out the full methodology. Here, we summarize the key findings.

OVERVIEW

Safe clean drinking water is by far the most universally valued goal for public policy among nine issues tested with these largely rural and small-town Wisconsin voters. Fully 89% say it is an important issue deserving of government action, including 82% who say it is *very* important. This rates well above all other issues tested in terms of the percent giving the top-box answer; next is infrastructure at 67%.

SW Wisconsin voters are largely aware of factors that threaten their drinking water supply. Yet, the initial position of about half of respondents is that the status quo serves them well enough, without more regulation to better protect drinking water. That is their position *in theory*. However, when asked about specific proposals that would add more regulation of agricultural practices, including a freeze on new or expanded CAFO construction and more requirements for disclosure of manure management practices, solid majorities support more regulation. When things are put in sharp focus, voters in SW Wisconsin get on board.

In the end, 15% of the respondent pool move from a position indicating resistance or neutrality to new regulations on water quality to a position supporting exactly that. The proportion of all respondents saying they support more regulation falls short of a majority (47%), but the trend is toward greater support.

In the context of elections, a majority indeed say they would favor a candidate supporting more regulation on drinking water over a candidate favoring the status quo (52-22%). About one in four (28%) say this would be a major issue for them as they consider candidates.

These views of regulation sit against a backdrop of appreciation for the natural assets that contribute to quality of life in SW Wisconsin's Driftless Area. In particular are outdoor recreation opportunities such as fishing, and canoeing; 87% rate them as excellent or good and yet this could be threatened by problems with water quality.

In short, voters in SW Wisconsin see a lot of dots—the geology of the state, the agricultural practices, CAFOs—that can affect their drinking water supply. It can also affect outdoor recreation and scenic landscapes, which are highly valued. Yet, their initial inclination is not pro-regulation. That means that public education about the specifics is the first step to turning wide awareness of the facts into support for action.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. As we have seen in virtually every study for ELPC, concern for safe clean drinking water is nearly universal.** Nearly nine in ten (89%) voters in largely rural counties in SW Wisconsin say drinking water quality is very (82%) or fairly (7%) important to them. That is ahead of concerns about infrastructure (84%), health care (82%), funding for public education (77%), and agricultural practices (74%).
- 2. Perhaps one reason it is so important to so many is that there may be some doubt about how clean the rivers are in SW Wisconsin.** Asked to rate eight elements that affect quality of life in SW Wisconsin, high marks go to outdoor recreation (87% rate this as excellent or good), scenic landscapes and quiet places (85%), friendly neighbors and communities (85%), and productive farmland (83%). By comparison to these strongly positive ratings, 66% assess the area's clean rivers as excellent (17%) or good (49%). There is only one element that attracts fewer excellent ratings, and that is local elected officials (7%, with 38% saying they are good).

Two other items were tested. 73% awarded an excellent or good rating to the way farmers take care of the land and water, and 69% rated public schools and colleges as excellent or good.

What this means. It's the water quality, stupid. These ratings provide an untainted look at the way SW Wisconsin voters view the importance of clean water and how the area fares in offering that to its residents. Two in three voters giving a good mark to their clean rivers may seem like a just-fine showing; in comparison to other elements that affect the quality of life, that number seems a bit low. Coupled with the lower confidence in the way farmers take care of the land and water (73%—still not bad), there is an initial indication that water quality could be better.

- 3. SW Wisconsin voters divide on whether more regulation for drinking water supplies is needed or whether what is in place now suffices.** More SW Wisconsin voters initially tilt toward keeping what is in place now (49%) than supporting more regulation to better protect drinking water supplies (40%).

Politics account for part of the divide, with 60% of Republicans favoring the status quo (versus 26% who opt for more regulation) and 56% of Democrats favoring more regulation (versus 39% who are satisfied with what is in place now). Independents reflect the overall average, with 40% saying more regulation is needed and 49% saying the status quo is satisfactory.

But politics is not the only influence. Women are more likely to favor action, with a ratio of more regulation-to-status quo of 48-43% (compared to men 31-56%). The opposite is true for SW Wisconsin voters under age 45 (38-54%) and those with a household member employed in farming or some ag-related business (33-53%). There is no meaningful difference among the counties included in this study.

Discussed below is the second test of this key metric, where more respondents favor additional regulations after hearing some facts and arguments—49%—versus preferring the status quo (33%).

4. When specific legislative proposals are tested, however, solid majorities support five tested mechanisms to address water quality. Three proposals win the support of around three in four SW Wisconsin voters:

- 79% Support a proposal that would require specific best management practices to be adopted to reduce fertilizer and manure runoff (including 50% who strongly support while 16% oppose).
- 75% Support a proposal to allow counties to impose stricter local standards to protect drinking water quality than otherwise required by state law (including 43% who strongly support while 21% oppose).
- 72% Support requiring greater disclosure and regulation of how concentrated animal feeding operations containing thousands of hogs and cows, known as CAFOs, spread manure on fields where it can run off or seep into waterways (including 43% who strongly support while 22% oppose).

The other two proposals win solid majority support:

- 58% Support putting a freeze on new or expanded construction of CAFOs, meaning concentrated animal feeding operations containing thousands of hogs and cows in southwest Wisconsin (including 34% who strongly support while another 34% oppose).
- 58% Support enacting safe drinking water regulations in southwest Wisconsin similar to those put in place in northeast Wisconsin (including 29% who strongly support while 13% oppose). For this item, a full 29% say they are not sure where they stand on this proposal, an indication of a lack of familiarity with the situation.

While Democrats and independents are more likely to support than oppose each proposal, at least a majority of Republicans do so as well, as do majorities of those living in farm/ag households, even if a couple are slim majorities.

What this means. These data suggest about half of SW Wisconsin voters are initially skeptical of adding regulations if they are not needed. The tilt in the initial read on this is in that direction. So, it is exceptionally important to note that when presented with specific legislative proposals that would add regulation, each is embraced by a majority, including majorities of those groups more likely than average to favor the status quo when asked about it in a general non-specific question.

So, we're seeing where the rubber hits the road. More regulation? No thank you. Oh, protecting our drinking water supply? Okay, let's have more regulation. As we have seen consistently across studies, water quality is a universal requirement that sits squarely with voters of every ilk. Conversations on water quality provide common ground for problem solving.

5. Awareness of what is happening in SW Wisconsin water and agricultural practices is relatively high, with one exception. Let's start with the exception. Just 29% say they are aware that the northeast part of the state has stronger regulations for manure management than the southwest Wisconsin areas, with two in three (66%) saying they were not aware until they learned this during the course of the interview.

For all five other facts tested, a majority say they were aware of the situation.

- 85% Aware that contaminated drinking water can result from over-application of commercial fertilizer on fields, which then seeps into groundwater, with 12% not aware.
- 74% Aware that contaminated drinking water results from some CAFOs spreading more manure on fields than can be naturally absorbed, and the manure then seeps into groundwater, with 23% not aware.
- 74% Aware that nitrate contamination in drinking water can cause human health problems, including “blue baby” disease, thyroid disease and cancer, with 23% not aware.
- 67% Aware that the southwest part of the state is especially vulnerable to drinking water contamination because the fractured bedrock and sometimes sandy soil allows some contaminants to get into groundwater, with 30% not aware.
- 57% Aware that an independent study shows that 42% of the wells tested in some southwest Wisconsin counties exceeded health standards for E. coli bacteria and nitrates, with 40% not aware.

For most facts, awareness across these facts is generally higher among those who have a household member working in farming or an ag-related business, Democrats, and those who initially favor more regulation addressing water quality.

One finding stands out. Overall, 57% were aware of the study of wells in SW Wisconsin; that rises to 71% of those within a farm/ag household. The smallest differences among demographic groups is found in reaction to learning about the difference in regulations between the northeast part of the state and SW Wisconsin.

6. Support for clean water regulations seems linked to the idea that government has a proper role to protect basic needs and rights. Four arguments in favor of more regulation on drinking water quality were tested. The strongest argument tested wove the philosophy with geologic reality.

Here is a rank-order of all four arguments tested, according to how many rated it an excellent or good reason to support more regulation on drinking water quality for SW Wisconsin.

- 80% Access to safe, clean drinking water is a basic need and right that our government ought to protect. Since groundwater in southwest Wisconsin is so vulnerable to contamination from fertilizer and manure pollution, there should be strong regulations in place to ensure safe, clean drinking water (11% say this not a good reason).
- 77% The state legislature has already allowed extra regulation to protect some northeast Wisconsin counties’ drinking water from nitrate pollution. Since southwest Wisconsin counties have similar geology and risks, we deserve at least that same level of protection (14% say this a not good reason).
- 71% It’s not fair that CAFO operators get to push the costs of their pollution onto everyone else. Agriculture operations create nitrate pollution, so it ought to be their responsibility to pay to prevent it or clean it up, even if that cuts into their profits or burdens their businesses (18% say this not a good reason).

70% Megafarms and CAFOs not only have an impact on water quality, they have a negative impact on the quality of life in southwest Wisconsin. They threaten independent family farmers and hurt tourism and outdoor recreation activities (19% say this not a good reason).

In every case, voters living in a farm/ag household were less likely to give an excellent rating, by five to nine percentage points. The greatest gap was for the item referencing CAFO operators pushing the costs of their pollution onto others: 25% of farm/ag household members rate this as an excellent reason (compared to 34% overall), and 34% say it is not a good reason to support more regulation (compared to 18% overall).

7. Reasons to oppose more regulation do not fare as well. At least three in 10 say each of the tested reasons to oppose is not a good reason. The following are ranked by the combined excellent and good ratings.

58% Instead of more regulation, it's better to invest in research and technology to fix these problems even if that takes longer (with 31% saying this is not a good reason).

54% There are multiple causes of drinking water problems, including leaking septic tanks, in southwest Wisconsin besides manure and excess fertilizer. It is wrong to single out one potential problem to take all the blame (with 35% saying this is not a good reason).

50% Agriculture is a major business sector in southwest Wisconsin. If there is additional regulation, that could hurt agricultural businesses. We can't risk that (with 38% saying this is not a good reason).

47% Regulatory agencies don't really understand agriculture and the people who spend their lives doing it. Agricultural operators know what's best for their soil and water, and they want to be good stewards. We don't need more regulation (42% saying this is not a good reason).

Farm/ag households are again more likely to deviate from the average sentiment. For three reasons tested, the gap is seven or eight points. For the item dealing with the comparative knowledge of regulatory agencies versus agricultural operators, the gap is 14 points. That is, people closest to the playing field are more likely to agree that they know better and don't need more regulation. Even so, it is still just about one in three (31%) who endorse this reason as excellent.

8. A second test of views on regulation shows a shift toward supporting more regulation. After hearing facts and rating arguments for and against more regulation, a plurality of 47% say they favor more regulation. That is +7 percentage points from the initial test. Just 33% say what is in place now is fine, a drop of 16 points from the beginning of the interview. More (16%) now describe their view as unsure, an upward move of 10 points.

15% of the SW Wisconsin voters in this survey moved from a neutral or negative position on added regulation to favoring more regulation to better protect drinking water supplies. A couple of demographic notes are worth making.

57% of movers are men, compared to 49% of the respondent pool. Recall, in the initial test, women were more likely to favor more regulation than were men, so it appears men moved so that both groups now support more than oppose more regulation.

In the initial test, women tilted toward saying more regulation was better than the status quo, 48-43%. They moved to a majority favoring 53-28%. A majority of men favored the other side of the ratio, 31-56%. They moved to plurality support for more regulation, 41-38%.

A few other groups are over-represented among movers: Those with no more than a high school education are 37% of movers, but 25% overall. Voters in households with incomes of \$100,000 or more are 21% of movers, but 15% overall. Republicans make up 30% of movers but are 24% overall.

What this means. The move to a position aligned with ELPC efforts is good news. With facts and arguments on both sides, many decide to change their position on more regulation. Demographic differences offer a bit of help in understanding the change, in that initial perceptions were more opposed to more regulation and then move to more support among men, Republicans, less educated and higher income voters.

9. **A pro-regulation candidate is preferred over one favoring the status quo.** Fully 52% say they would be inclined to support a candidate that supports more regulation to better protect drinking water supplies in SW Wisconsin over a candidate who opposes more regulations that could burden CAFOs and megafarms (22%). This includes an impressive 79% of respondents who moved to a position favoring added regulation who did not hold that position at the outset.

There is a notable lack of difference by age, with at least half of every age group broken out in this study supportive of a candidate who favors more regulation. Support is higher than average among the following groups:

52% Support a candidate who favors more regulation

85%	Democrats
67%	College degree or more
62%	Income less than \$70,000
60%	Women

Opposition is higher than average among the following groups:

22% Support a candidate who opposes more regulation

43%	Republicans
37%	Farm/ag households

10. **Two in three see water quality as a major or minor issue for the next general election.** More, however, see it as a minor issue (40%) than a major issue (28%). Democrats (43%) and those in lower income households (37% reporting less than \$70,000) were more likely to see this as a major issue.

What this all means. Even with high awareness of factors that may pose threats to water quality in SW Wisconsin, the issue of water quality seems mostly dormant as one that would influence how voters select candidates to back. An early question in the interview represents opinion on the question of regulation as it exists today. That could read on whether more regulation is needed suggests sizeable support for greater stringency, but more are inclined to think the status quo is working just fine.

That means that the first order of business would be to make the case that there is, in fact, a clear and present threat—trouble in River City, as it were.

The building blocks are there. First, this is a knowledgeable electorate aware of some of the intricacies involved in land and water management as it affects drinking water. That is a big head start. Second,

even though there is initial resistance to the idea of adding new regulations *in theory*, majorities support each of five water quality proposals that would indeed add more regulation, in some cases with greater than 3-to-1 support.

Third, these SW Wisconsin voters respond more favorably to arguments to increase regulation than to arguments to oppose. And, in fact, 15% of all voters in this survey moved from not favoring to favoring more regulation to better protect drinking water supplies.

The capper is some skepticism that SW Wisconsin enjoys clean rivers. Among eight quality of life elements tested, only two receive excellent ratings from fewer than one in five. Those two are local elected officials (7%) and clean rivers (17%). While a majority give an excellent or good rating (66%), voters' evaluation of clean rivers still pales in comparison to outdoor recreation (50% excellent), scenic landscapes (46%), and friendly neighbors and communities (40%).

Those elements provide a starting point for a clean water platform. A majority say they would be inclined to support a candidate who favors more regulation of drinking water supplies in SW Wisconsin.

The barrier is in making the case voters need to hear in order to care about this issue. Just 28% see this as a major issue after hearing facts and arguments and responding in a pro-regulation manner. Many, apparently, just do not perceive water quality as an *imminent* threat.

Three other points are of interest.

- 11. Almost every elected official and organization tested wins more approval than disapproval.** Despite local elected officials getting low ratings as they contribute to the quality of life in SW Wisconsin, more rate the job performance of local officials as satisfactory than do not. The lone exception among elected officials in general is Donald Trump, 42-52%. The two ag associations tested follow the overall pattern; 61-12% for the Wisconsin Farm Bureau and 48-12% for the Wisconsin Farmers Union. Naturally, there are partisan differences.

	Ratio: Approve- Disapprove %	Approve: Republican %	Approve: Democrat %	Approve: Independents %
Wisconsin Farm Bureau	61-12	66	61	59
Ron Kind as U.S. representative for the 3 rd congressional district	58-21	54	76	49
Driftless Area Land Conservancy	58-14	58	68	55
Tammy Baldwin as U.S. senator	53-35	21	91	51
Tony Evers as governor	52-38	21	88	52
Ron Johnson as U.S. senator	48-35	74	31	41
Wisconsin Farmers Union	48-12	50	47	48
Howard Marklein as state senator	46-24	63	31	43
Travis Tranel as state representative	43-20	56	34	40
Donald Trump as president of the United States	42-52	90	3	36
Todd Novak as state representative	41-17	52	39	36
Mark Pocan as U.S. representative for the 2 nd congressional district	38-21	34	53	32

12. In a test of how respondents view language surrounding legislative changes, slightly more think of “enacting standards” as fairer and stronger than “enacting regulations.” It is a 10-point difference—41% to 31%, with 4% saying the two phrases strike them as the same, and 24% saying they aren’t sure how to answer the question. In this very general context, Republicans are more likely to say “standards” is stronger, with 55%; Democrats are more likely to tilt toward “regulations, with 46%. “Standards” get a bit of a bump from independents, with 47% saying they think that term is stronger, compared to 31% for regulations.

13. The Driftless Area Land Conservancy is widely popular. Overall, 58% approve of the organization, with just 14% disapproving—a ratio greater than 4-to-1. There is little political differentiation, with 58% of Republicans approving, as do 68% of Democrats and 55% of independents. Still, more than one in four (28%) of all SW Wisconsin voters do not know enough about the organization to rate its performance.