**DNR secretary aims to address manure contamination of water**

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Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Secretary Preston Cole says he’s looking to work with the agriculture industry to help address manure contamination of drinking and surface water in the state.

The former Natural Resources Board member recently told reporters he expects “a robust conversation” with stakeholders that could include discussions about improving regulations, examining the role of regional digesters, trading water pollution credits and more.

“The department anticipates a robust conversation with impacted industries that apply manure to sensitive areas as to what that strategy looks like going forward, what kinds of regulations need to be improved, what kinds of adaptive management strategies can come in play to mitigate the harm to drinking water and surface water,” he said.

Other steps, Cole said, could include looking at new or planned expansions for large-scale farms, called concentrated animal feeding operations. He added when CAFO operators turn in their permits to the DNR, there could be an opportunity for dialogue. But he didn’t say the agency should change how it decides on permits.

Specifically, he pointed to the karst geology of certain eastern Wisconsin counties, where soil overlays fractured bedrock and allows pollutants to more easily enter the groundwater.

“We’re not making anybody leave, we’re not turning folks down. But look what you’re getting into when you go to locations that have swiss cheese as an (underlining) and all of the practices that you have to put in play,” Cole said.

Cole, who recently met with members of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, said the group is “ready to come to the table” to discuss those issues.

Karen Gefvert, the group’s executive director of governmental relations, agreed.

“We want to have that engagement,” she said. “Farmers need to be part of the solution. And in order to be part of the solution we have to be part of the conversation. I’m not saying we’re going to agree to whatever it is that’s on the table, but we’re willing to have this conversation.”

And Dairy Business Association Government Affairs Director John Holevoet said while DBA hasn’t yet met with Cole, the group shares his concern about manure contaminating the state’s water.

“We can play a role in finding solutions to lots of different problems that we face on the landscape,” he said.

Cole also said he’s planning to restore language to the DNR’s website surrounding climate change after the agency came under fire during the previous administration for scrubbing references to it.

Still, he didn’t say whether the site would include language about human beings’ role in the process.

While Cole said people “play a role in climate change,” he didn’t say definitively what would be put online.

“We certainly want to be able to give a perspective as to climate change, what’s going on around us,” he said. Noting the rise in solar and other renewable energy sources, he added: “We want to be able to put some of that modern-day stuff on there.”

“We want to make sure that our information on the website is timely, appropriate, focused on our beliefs around climate change,” he said.

The DNR under former Gov. Scott Walker drew criticism for removing information related to climate change, including in December 2016 surrounding a webpage on “the Great Lakes and a changing world.”

The language, which is still posted on the page, reads that “the Earth is going through a change” for reasons currently “being debated and researched.” It had previously said: “Earth’s climate is changing. Human activities that increase heat-trapping (‘greenhouse’) gases are the main cause.”

A DNR spokeswoman says while there isn’t a timeframe for updating the website to make changes to the language surrounding climate change, “it is on the list” of priorities.

Asked about the possibility of bringing back then-Gov. Jim Doyle’s Global Warming Task Force, Cole said he’d be open to revisiting some of the group’s ideas and determine whether there are opportunities “to implement some of that without breaking the bank.”

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