



# Water Runoff Pollution Threatens Wisconsin Economy

## *Clean Water is Good for Business*

**Runoff pollution** damages Wisconsin industries, including agriculture and food production. Handled poorly, runoff pollution costs businesses and other taxpayers billions of dollars every year.

### **What is Runoff Pollution?**

Runoff water is rain not immediately absorbed and filtered by the ground that instead runs off the surface, seeping into streams, ponds, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Byproducts of modern agriculture, urbanization and industry all contaminate runoff water.

**Agricultural runoff** comes from livestock waste and chemical products such as fertilizers and synthetic pesticides. All contain high levels of nitrogen, phosphorous, and other compounds that rain sluices into bodies of water, where they cause pollution and fertilize algae blooms that kill fish.

**Urban runoff** results from oil, grease, antifreeze, brake fluid and other polluting products deposited by motor vehicles on roads, in parking lots and other impervious paved surfaces, and from improper disposal of products such as paint and lawn care chemicals. All mix with rainwater that carries them directly into bodies of water before topsoil can absorb them.

**Industrial runoff** is caused by inadequate disposal of industrial waste. Every year, coal-burning power plants emit millions of tons of coal ash; fine particles infused with toxins like sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide.



### **IN A SNAPSHOT**

- In 2016, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources found that over 302,000 acres of lakes and 4,700 miles of rivers and streams were impaired and unfit for some or all human uses in Wisconsin.
- In Wisconsin, 31 of our 72 counties already have governmental drainage districts to coordinate drainage system upkeep. Farmers should receive tax credits to participate in drainage districts and upgrade to pipe drainage systems to reduce agricultural runoff, which also improves crop yields, consistent production, and efficient use and allocation of water.
- Wisconsin's 10,000 licensed dairy farms produce 14% of all the milk and more than 25% of all the cheese made in the U.S., but cows on industrial farms in Wisconsin emit as much untreated waste as 8.6 million people do. Farmers should be supported in correcting manure storage with runoff prevention systems.
- Studies conducted throughout Wisconsin show that including cover crops in corn and soybean crop rotations reduce nitrate leaching into water by 28% to 31%. Crop insurance programs should be reformed to incentivize, not penalize, planting of cover crops.

These fall on waterways and on the ground, to mix with rainwater as runoff pollution.

### **Runoff Pollution Costs Wisconsin Farming, Dairy, and Tourism Businesses**

Runoff pollution from fertilizers and pesticides used in farming contaminates water sources and causes erosion and soil degradation that make land unfit for growing crops. Runoff pollution also hurts tourism and recreation business by damaging lakes and streams in state parks, major tourist attractions like the beautiful Wisconsin Dells, and other outdoor areas throughout Wisconsin. All other businesses are also vulnerable to water pollution: All need a healthy workforce, healthy customers and an uncontaminated supply chain to survive.



## Water Pollution, Especially from Agriculture, Endangers Wisconsin's Economic Potential

Runoff pollution endangers thousands of Wisconsin businesses and the livelihoods of millions. Agriculture is one of the biggest sources of runoff pollution but is also one of the industries that will lose the most if runoff pollution is not controlled.

Non-point runoff pollution (from a combination of agricultural, industrial, and urban sources) is the biggest source of water pollution in Wisconsin, with agricultural runoff the primary cause. When a body of water is too polluted for human use, it is labeled as "impaired." In 2016, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources found that over 302,000 acres of lakes and 4,700 miles of rivers and streams in Wisconsin were impaired and unfit for some or all human uses.

Clean, abundant water is essential for all of Wisconsin's 76,800 individual farms, which generate \$88.3 billion a year and employ 413,000 Wisconsinites. Notably, around 9,000 of these farms are part of Wisconsin's famous dairy industry, employing 78,000 people and generating \$43.4 billion annually.

All of Wisconsin's farms and food processing facilities get their water from our waterways. Runoff pollution must be reduced quickly to avoid severe damage to agriculture, dairy, tourism and all of the other businesses around the state.

To safeguard our economy and overall wellbeing, Wisconsin should make it a priority to:

- **Reform crop insurance programs** to incentivize cover crops. In Wisconsin, at least 90% of nitrogen pollution comes from non-point sources, especially agriculture; and phosphorous pollution from farming has impaired 39% of waters. Cover crops can help filter and recycle these pollutants, guarding against soil erosion and other damage, but cover crops are used on only 9.7% of cropland in Wisconsin. Current crop insurance programs actually dis-incentivize cover crops by putting difficult-to-meet guidelines on crop termination dates. Many farmers throughout the Corn Belt indicate they would be more willing to plant cover crops if cost-sharing assistance at a modest \$23 per acre were available.

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ing farmers tax deductions, subsidies or other incentives to plant cover crops would reduce runoff pollution and preserve the long-term viability of our valuable water and soil.

- **Support reduction of dairy farm waste runoff.** Wisconsin's approximately 10,000 licensed dairy farms produce 14% of all the milk and more than 25% of all the cheese made in the U.S. In just one year, cows on industrial farms in Wisconsin emit as much untreated waste as 8.6 million people do. One way to reduce manure runoff from dairy production is to correct manure storage with runoff prevention systems of rain gutters, downspouts and outlets; diversions through channels or slopes; settling basins; and filter strips. Dairy farmers should be offered support in adopting these systems.
- **Support federal tax credits for farmers** who divert runoff water away from streams. USDA research has found that slowing runoff and rerouting it into the ground significantly reduces nitrogen flow into larger streams. A widely used structural solution is a pipe drainage system, and in Wisconsin, 31 of our 72 counties already have governmental drainage districts to coordinate drainage system upkeep. Offering a tax credit to farmers who participate in drainage districts and upgrade to a pipe drainage system to reduce agricultural runoff will also lead to higher crop yields, more consistent production, and efficient use and allocation of water.
- **Develop Wisconsin's own criteria** to quantify nitrogen and phosphorous pollution levels. Wisconsin's robust agriculture, including dairy, is essential to the state and the nation, but agriculture also plays a major role in contaminating water quality throughout the Mississippi River Basin. Farming itself is also endangered by runoff pollution that erodes and contaminates soil. In advance of eventual regulation and potential selectivity in federal grant awards, Wisconsin should develop numeric criteria for nitrogen and phosphorous levels as part of a demonstrable control program.
- **Prevent new sources of pollution**, especially in problem areas. Where water quality is already impaired, control of non-point source pollution must be utilized to prevent new sources of pollution in those areas. (Anti-degradation policy makes an exception only for significant social or economic development in those areas). The EPA would need to define what counts as "existing nonpoint source control compliance issues." ★



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