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## Study: Northwoods environment best, central region among worst

Marathon County's radon, Portage County's water quality called health risks

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Wausau Daily Herald*

### **Updated to include link to full report, at right.**

Residents of far northern Wisconsin typically live in an environment more conducive to good health, but those in central Wisconsin are surrounded by some of the worst conditions in the state, according to a new study.

Marathon and Portage counties rank near the bottom of the state's 72 counties for physical environment and water quality.

Marathon County ranked last in built environment, which includes factors such as risk of radon exposure and alternatives to driving for transportation, according to findings by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Population Health Sciences.

"The effects of environmental exposures on overall health may not result in poor health outcomes immediately, but may evolve over years or even decades," wrote the authors.

The study is intended to be a progress report showing where counties can improve, said Jessica Athens, a project assistant at the university's Population Health Institute who helped author the report.

Marathon County is a "hot zone" for radon, which has been linked to lung cancer, said Judy Burrows, director of chronic disease prevention for Marathon County. Preventive measures can reduce risk of exposure.

"I think this is research that confirms what residents of this area already knew" about the need for alternatives to transportation, said Burrows, who also works with a committee developing long-range recommendations on multiuse paths.

Having multiuse paths and sidewalks adds to the livability of a community, said Dean Zuleger, village of Weston administrator. The community is undertaking a study to guide long-range planning of paths and sidewalks.

Portage County ranked lowest among the state's 72 counties and the city of Milwaukee for water quality because of its high percentage of wells affected by high nitrate levels.

The city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County tied with several others for first in water quality, signaling a dramatic turnaround since a cryptosporidium outbreak in the city's municipal water in 1993 sickened 400,000 people and was linked to more than 100 deaths.

Generally, people who get water from individual wells are at greater risk of contamination than those getting water from municipal water systems, which are subject to frequent inspections and

maintenance, Athens said.

Among the most environmentally healthy counties are Bayfield County, which tied with several other counties for first in water quality and also ranked first in physical environment; and Sawyer, Menominee, Vilas and Iron counties, which ranked second through fifth respectively for overall physical environment.

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