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Portage County ranked lowest in water quality

BY AMY OLSON • FOR THE JOURNAL • JULY 8, 2008

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Residents in Wisconsin's rural counties generally have an environment more conducive to good health than those in urban areas, according to a new study. But Marathon and Portage counties rank at the bottom across the state for physical environment and water quality.

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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. 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 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 write the report.

Marathon County's lack of alternatives to driving and radon exposure led to its poor ranking, Athens said.

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 multi-use paths.

Researchers looked at the percentage of people who'd been exposed to levels of nitrates exceeding the federal Environmental Protection Agency's limits at any point in the year to assess drinking water quality, Athens said. Research suggests it can interfere with the ability of infants' blood to carry oxygen, resulting in "blue baby syndrome."

People who get water from individual wells are at greater risk of contamination than those getting water from municipal water systems because of frequent inspections and maintenance in those city systems,

Athens said.

"Nitrates are driven largely by agricultural activities," Athens said. Following best practices for applying fertilizers can reduce run off that results in drinking water contamination.

Portage County seems to have the greatest problems with nitrates in drinking water east of the Plover River, said Kim Halverson, director of water and sewage at the city of Stevens Point. One well next to a golf course



DOUG WOJCIK/STEVENS POINT JOURNAL

The village of Plover uses two separate plants and systems to remove nitrates from its drinking water.

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ABOUT RADON

Radon is a naturally occurring odorless, colorless gas that causes lung cancer. For more information about how to test for radon and to prevent gas build-up in your home, log onto http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/dph_beh/radonprot.

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