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## Report finds need for greater well water quality

BY LIZ WELTER • CENTRAL WISCONSIN SUNDAY • JULY 13, 2008

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The quality of drinking water from wells in both Portage and Wood counties can lead to potential serious health issues, according to a report on the status of different environmental factors impact on health in Wisconsin counties.

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The findings by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Population Health Sciences were reported last week. While Wood County ranked toward the bottom in water quality related to nitrates, Portage County ranked last.

"Considering they're both agricultural areas, it may be more run-off. Agricultural land is a huge contributor," said Jessica Athens, one of the study's authors.

While the environmental results of the counties isn't news to policy makers, the study is intended to be a progress report showing where counties can improve to mitigate the potential affects poor environment can have on health, explained Athens.

Nitrates in well water in both counties exceeds the Environmental Protection Agency standards. Exposure to nitrates is most notably associated with blue baby syndrome, but increasing studies suggest birth defects and cancer are among other potential negative health effects, Athens said.

"People should protect themselves and monitor their water supply," said George Kraft, professor of water resources and director of the Center for Watershed Science and Education at UW-Stevens Point.

Water testing kits are available at both county's health department offices and Marshfield City Hall.

Studies on water and nitrates demonstrate the relationship between agriculture and nitrates, Kraft said. While farmers need to apply nitrates as fertilizer for many crops, it is possible to apply less and still achieve maximum results, he said.

The fact that nitrates are found in ground water is usually an indicator for other contaminants such as pesticides, said Nancy Eggleston, Wood County environmental health supervisor.

"There's more there, this is just looking at one piece in water," Eggleston said.

A better system of integrating data from studies is needed to measure the impact of different factors on public health, said Athens.

Other environmental issues in the counties are radon and lead exposure. For more information about kits to measure radon and lead in your home, contact your county public health department.

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