



**State of the County Address**  
**By Portage County Executive Patty Dreier**  
**July 15, 2014**  
**Stevens Point, WI**

It is an honor to be here tonight representing more than 70,000 citizens of our great county. There are many topics that I could address tonight, much progress that I could mention, but instead tonight I need to call attention to a subject of concern to all of us. That subject is *groundwater*.

The State of Our County is directly related to the State of Our Groundwater for it is groundwater that is at the center of our lives—it is the source for drinking water and nearly every other water use for our homes, businesses, and government. The top few feet of groundwater is the main source of water for nearly every lake and stream in our county. It is the same source of water upon which we depend to irrigate our crops and support our industries. Without a healthy aquifer, Portage County would be an environmental and economic desert.

If so much depends on this resource called groundwater, why aren't we doing more to ensure its vital future? After all, it is our very lifeblood. Even our bodies are about 65% water—more if we are talking about a child's body. Water is "every body's" story.

When I was a little girl—a sixth grader growing up in rural Fond du Lac County, there was a shallow stream a half mile down the road from where we lived. I used to ride my bike over the rolling terrain to go to The Creek, as I called it. The Creek was a destination. When I got there, I would dismount my bike. Then standing atop the narrow cement bridge, I would peer first over the right side to see the water as it passed beneath me (there was a farmhouse on this side of the bridge). Then, I'd walk over to the other side to see the water as it flowed from under the bridge into a marsh. I could see round stones in the stream below—pebbles that glistened like shiny pennies. It was a magical place—the sounds, the interesting life that I noticed and learned about there. Each side of the bridge was very different. *But they were connected, too.* While I felt like it was “my” creek then, I have come to learn as an adult that it really did belong to me—and to you, too, for all of the waters of this great State of Wisconsin belong to all of us.

What fond memories do you have about bodies of water in your own life? I would venture to say that most of us who live here in Portage County do so because of the waters here. Besides the Wisconsin River's “backbone” for historic and modern commerce and recreation, Portage County has about 100 lakes and about 115 miles of streams that include premiere fishing, swimming, and waters to paddle. Our county seat, Stevens Point, won national competitions in 1990, 2009, and 2010 for the taste of its water. Stevens Point has a claim to fame as

“The City of Wonderful Water” since it was marked in stones at Iverson Park somewhere between 1936 and 1940. Portage County's water legacy is a rich one.

You and I are graced with the great fortune of standing atop, living atop, working atop one of the most precious and seemingly plentiful resources anyone could ever dream of.

If water is perhaps our greatest asset to Portage County (next to our human capital, I would suggest), then why is it that we do so little to steward it?

In 2011 and 2012, Portage County had the dubious honor of being the county that pumped the most groundwater in the State of Wisconsin. The draft 2013 numbers just came out showing that we continue in the top spot. Over 21 billion gallons were pumped in 2011, over 35 billion gallons in 2012, and roughly 27 billion gallons were pumped in 2013. Between 73 and 83% of the water drawn from our groundwater each year is used to irrigate crops which, in turn, helps to fuel our \$6 billion agricultural economy. Over the past three years, 8 – 13% of the billions of gallons each year were pumped for municipal public water use. Unfortunately, after sewage treatment, most of our county's municipal waters are sent downstream and lost to our groundwater basin.

*How are we doing to manage our aquifer and protect our shared future?*

Even though we've been in a wetter cycle as far as precipitation goes over our area since about 1970, the health of some of our lakes and streams indicates that we're not doing so well. It is a bedrock principle of hydrology that when we pump out groundwater in one place, we take it from somewhere else. Because most of our lakes and streams in Portage County are fed by the top few feet of groundwater, they act like canaries in a mine when it comes to groundwater. When we pump groundwater at top rates of over a million gallons a day out of high cap wells located in the vicinity of our lakes and streams, we draw down water from those bodies like when we sip a drink through a straw.

How much do we value natural aquatic ecosystems in Portage County?

How are we doing to manage our aquifer to protect our human systems in Portage County?

Since June of this year, 45 homes in a concentrated area within the Town of Hull have had to replace their wells. Thirty six other homes are experiencing water pressure problems in the same vicinity. Why? Why are so many families experiencing water issues in a condensed area near a high capacity well (#11) and why have their collective problems appeared only after that well went online?

I live about a half mile or so from the above noted 81 families with water problems. In my neighborhood, we have concerns of our own. We are aware of a high capacity well permit application pending at the DNR right now for an 80-acre parcel immediately north of two subdivisions including the one in which I live. Between our two subdivisions, there are 52 residences—each with their own private wells. There are another 31 homes in the near vicinity. We know that the mapped flow of groundwater into our neighborhoods and wells comes from the north and east. We know the high cap well application for the parcel immediately north and east notes that the proposed average water usage is 576,000 gallons per day during the growing season and that there is a proposed maximum water usage per day of over 1.152 million gallons. My well was drilled on November 1, 1993, and it is 28 feet deep per the label from Chet's Plumbing and Heating on my utility box at home. Am I worried about how this high capacity well immediately adjacent to our subdivision will affect water at home and in our neighborhood? *You bet.*

Let me ask the question again: *How are we doing to manage our aquifer and to protect our shared future?*

I share these stories as illustrations of very real conflicts and issues in our county right now. It is time to lift our heads out of the sand and take some thoughtful actions that steward our groundwater resources instead of pitting water users against each other.

The water belongs to all of us....those who are growers, those who dwell in or work in municipalities, those home owners with their own private wells, those who love to recreate on our lakes and streams, those who are waterfront owners, those who love to fish or paddle or paint our waters. The water belongs to all of us.

My grandfather was a potato farmer in the Plainfield area. My descendants helped to settle the Almond area. Our agricultural tradition in Portage County is something I'm proud of and something I believe all of us can celebrate. Leaders in our agricultural community have shared their wisdom with me, hosted me on their farms, taught me about technological advances that conserve water, and let me join in irrigation discussions. They are doing many great things and have opened my eyes, but we must do more. At the same time, we know that our municipalities and other businesses need water and each of us as citizens can do more to conserve and protect our groundwater. We all must do more.

I took a trip out west to Yosemite National Park in June. Along Highway 99 in the San Joaquin Valley between Sacramento and Bakersfield in California, these signs appear in the sandy fields beside the road every few miles. (Photo, next page: *No Water = No Jobs; Solve the Water Crisis; Families Protecting the Valley.com.*) It was a sobering reminder for me that water means everything to us. *Everything*. Can a San Joaquin Valley happen here?



In order to safeguard the future of our agricultural industry as well as the future of our municipalities, the future of rural dwellers on their own private wells, the future of our lakes and streams, and the future of our tax base and economy in Portage County, let us come together and get serious about actions that we can take to steward our precious groundwater resources.

We cannot wait. This “free for all” on water has got to stop. We need thoughtful management across all sectors. Let us let go of “my science is bigger or better than your science” and get on with the business of stewardship. We know enough about groundwater right this minute—

even just those of us in this room—to begin making some sensible choices that protect our future.

We can pretend there is no problem, or there is no problem on the horizon, or that it is just “a cycle.” But that is irresponsible. *The time is now for us to take this into our own local hands to respect our neighbors, to honor our heritage, and to ensure a healthy aquifer inheritance for generations to come.*

This is not about pointing fingers. This is about doing the right thing at the right time and the right time is NOW.

I don't know about you, but I would rather not find out if a San Joaquin Valley scenario can happen here.

Through listening sessions and a number of other ways and means over at least the next six months, I will be working with our Planning and Zoning Department Team and others from across all sectors to gather visions, ideas and action strategies that we can take forward as stewards of a groundwater resource for future generations.

*Stewardship* means “Responsible for overseeing the protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving.” If this doesn't describe our groundwater in Portage County, I don't know what does. *We have it in us, Portage County. **We can develop a world class groundwater stewardship model.*** We can put it to work, then reach

out to others in the Central Sands and beyond and show them the way.

Last year, my husband and I were taking a few days together in the Kettle Moraine area and I took him, for the first time, to The Creek of my childhood. Thirty five years had passed since I last stood on that bridge in rural Fond du Lac County. And the shallow stream still flowed and the round pebbles still shone like shiny pennies in the waters below.

*What will our children of Portage County find when they visit their beloved lake or stream 35 years from now?*

The choice is up to us—all of us. Portage County, we can do this. There has never been a greater opportunity than now to step up and lead in an effort to safeguard our future. Everything is connected to everything else. Every water user is connected to every other water user. What we do today, what actions we choose to take now will make all the difference for tomorrow. ###