



## Recreation

### Illinoisans at Risk from Nitrates Exposure

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A **new report** issued by Prairie Rivers Network (PRN) finds that, since 1980, over 322,000 people in Illinois have been exposed to nitrate levels in their drinking water that exceed the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) of 10 mg/L of nitrate, the Federal drinking water standard. Sixty-seven community water systems across the State have experienced long-term exposure to amounts of nitrate greater than 5 mg/L, levels that have been found to be associated with increased rates of bladder, ovarian, and thyroid cancers; birth defects such as spina bifida, limb deficiencies, and cleft palate; as well as methemoglobinemia in babies, a condition that causes them to get less oxygen, more commonly known as Blue Baby Syndrome.

The report, titled ***Illinois' Ignored Water Crisis: Preventing Nitrates from Contaminating Illinois Drinking Water***, shows that elevated levels of nitrates in our water are widespread and getting worse.

Macon County is the most affected area in the State, where 77.6% of residents on public water systems have been exposed to elevated nitrate levels exceeding the Federal MCL at least once. Many more public water systems across the State have had multiple violations for high levels of nitrate. Increasing numbers of central Illinois communities, like Moweaqua and Taylorville, have had to purchase nitrate treatment facilities to reduce nitrate levels in their community water supply.

"Nitrates in our drinking water threaten public health," said Prairie Rivers Network Executive Director Carol Hays. "And that puts an undue burden on communities that cannot afford treatment facilities to foot the bill for making their water safe to drink."

Treating water that has been contaminated is expensive. The City of Decatur, IL, spent almost \$7.6 million dollars to build a nitrate removal facility, with average annual operation and maintenance costs of \$67,000. Smaller communities that cannot afford such treatment facilities must provide bottled water to residents at a cost.

"While this problem is very concerning, it comes with reasonable solutions in the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy," says PRN Agricultural Programs Specialist **Catie Gregg**. "Ramping up farm conservation practices across the State can dramatically improve this critical water and public health issue, while also helping Illinois farmers be better stewards of the land, protect the health of soil and water, and improve their bottom line."

Due to recent funding cuts by the State of Illinois, Illinois' Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD's) have seen decreased project funding and staff shortages, limiting their ability to help farmers who want to implement conservation practices. The State is also leaving millions in Federal funding for conservation on the table, by opting out of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). As a result, Illinois stands to lose over 340,000 acres of land from continuous conservation.

"Conservation is a much less costly way to improve water quality. Funding SWCD's and conservation programs like CREP are essential to reducing nitrate levels in our water," Hays said. "Illinois is failing to provide resources for cost-effective strategies, to protect water, at a time when communities can least afford additional treatment costs."

Prairie Rivers Network (PRN) is Illinois' advocate for clean water and healthy rivers and is the Illinois affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation. PRN advocates for cultural values, policies, and practices that sustain the ecological health and biological diversity of Illinois' land and water resources and ecosystems. It is a member-supported, nonprofit organization that champions clean, healthy rivers and lakes, and safe drinking water to benefit the people and wildlife of Illinois.



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