



Title: Groups seek EPA help to curb groundwater pollution

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Groups seek EPA help to curb groundwater pollution

Iowa Capital Dispatch

Environmental groups recently asked the federal government to intervene in northeast Iowa, where ag pollution is believed to have contaminated scads of private wells with unhealthy concentrations of nitrate.

Their petition mirrors one that sought the same help last year for southeast Minnesota, which has the same porous topography that makes its groundwater more prone to contamination from the surface.

That request prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to direct Minnesota to analyze the

scope of the problem, provide clean drinking water to affected residents and develop longer-term plans to prevent the contamination.

The petition concerning northeast Iowa asks the EPA to use its emergency authority granted by the Safe Drinking Water Act "to urgently address the imminent and substantial endangerment to public health within the karst region of Iowa caused by ongoing and increasing nitrate contamination."

It alleges that Iowa's attempts in recent decades to reduce farm pollution have failed.

The state has used its **Nutrient**

Reduction Strategy to encourage voluntary actions by farmers to prevent their fertilizers from leeching into the state's waterways. Stream monitoring has yet to show significant progress in reducing nitrate and phosphorus contamination since the strategy's inception in 2014.

"It has been an abysmal failure," said Michael Schmidt, an attorney for the **Iowa Environmental Council**. "The fact that Minnesota is having to do more — even though it already has more regulation, more oversight of these sources — means

that Iowa will have to take even bigger steps to address the pollution

problems here."

The answer: state-mandated restrictions on the amount of fertilizer that can be applied to crop fields, with special rules for karst landscape, said David Cwiertny, director of the Center for Health Effects of Environmental Contamination at the University of Iowa.

"It can't be voluntary. It can't be suggested," he said. "What will get us improvement — and I know people don't like to talk about it — but it's regulations. And regulations work."

It's unclear when the EPA might direct Iowa to address the drinking water contamination.