



Students help Eau Claire County update groundwater management plan

RELEASED: Dec. 1, 2009

EAU CLAIRE — Students in a hydrogeology class at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire are helping Eau Claire County revise its comprehensive plan for managing groundwater.

"This is important work," Dr. Katherine Grote, the assistant professor of geology who is teaching the class, said of the project. "It needs to be done, yet the county can't afford to hire someone to work on it. The students are doing a lot of leg work that will provide the county with valuable information."

The Eau Claire County Groundwater Advisory Committee is updating the Groundwater Management Plan, which was written in 1994, said Kirsten Cahow-Scholtes, Eau Claire County land conservation supervisor. However, current information about long-standing and newly identified issues that relate to groundwater management was needed before the committee could finish revising the plan, she said.

The students have been researching 15 groundwater-related issues identified as priorities by the county, Grote said. Some of the students' work involves updating information about issues that already were identified in the 1994 plan, such as gas storage tanks, she said. Other topics relate to issues that have surfaced in the 15 years since the plan was created, such as concerns about pharmaceuticals in groundwater, she said.

Students will share their findings with county representatives during class presentations Dec. 9. The presentations will run from 11 a.m.-2p.m. in Room 248 of Phillips Science Hall.

The students also will provide written reports that the county can incorporate into its groundwater management plan, Grote said. The reports will include links to regulations and other information that will help make the plan a useful online resource, she said, noting that the plan currently is available only in a paper format.

"Getting the information on the Web will allow more people to access the plan and use the information that is in it," Grote said. "It will be an important resource for many people."

When she gave students information about the topics she wanted researched, she also provided names of professionals at various agencies whom they could contact for information about the identified topics, Cahow-Scholtes said.

"The research we asked students to do involves traditional Web and literature reviews but also includes contacting the different management entities, such as the DNR or the health department," Cahow-Scholtes said. "Students are getting a real hands-on experience in conducting interviews with these area agency people. For many students, this will be the first time they have contacted anyone at these agencies so it is very good experience for them."

Almost all of the 20 students in the class are conducting interviews at the various agencies, Grote said. The interviews give them experience working with professionals, but also provides opportunities for students to network with people in a field that interests them, she said.

"The real-life experiences are very valuable for students," Grote said. "They'll get a feel for how groundwater protection is implemented, and they'll have a good understanding of regulations and standards in the field. They'll also make contacts that may be important to them down the road."

The project has provided her with an opportunity to become familiar with local groundwater issues and to develop an understanding of how those issues have changed in recent years, said Taylor Crist, a senior geology major from Eau Claire. Crist is verifying and updating the state regulations within the Eau Claire County Management Controls section of the Groundwater Management Plan.

"This project is challenging and rewarding," said Crist. "I have never been introduced to much environmental law, and by researching several groundwater regulations my understanding of how the county protects groundwater has grown. As a student, I am able to use my judgment on certain aspects of the project, similar to how I expect a future career will be like."

The project is an excellent example of the kinds of community-university partnerships that make UW-Eau Claire such an asset to the region, Cahow-Scholtes said.

"This partnership is beneficial for the county and university for so many reasons," She said. "It's a great example of how willing the students and faculty are to help the region."

-30-

JB/DW