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DSPS Announces Funding for UW-Stevens Point Study by Soil and Waste Resources Scientist to Update Septage Disposal Standards

MADISON, Wis. – Department of Safety and Professional Services Secretary Dawn Crim traveled to the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point today to meet with campus leadership and faculty partnering on an ongoing septage study funded by DSPS.

The agency recently secured funding for the next phase of Professor Rob Michitsch’s work studying, among other things, nitrogen and phosphorus levels as well as other plant-based nutrients, heavy metals, and fecal pathogens in Wisconsin septage samples. Septage is the liquid or solid waste produced by private onsite wastewater treatments systems. His findings will help state government better interpret federal Environmental Protection Agency standards and help with future Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources recommendations, particularly for septage disposal.

“We are pleased that we were able to secure funding for this important work that will help inform policy decisions and better adhere to federal regulations and safety standards,” Crim said.

Early pilot studies suggest Wisconsin septage nitrogen and phosphorus levels are lower than estimates upon which septage disposal guidelines are based. For example, the EPA regulates the amount of septage that can be applied to soil in part to ensure that added nitrogen and phosphorus do not exceed certain levels.

More current and thorough information will help policymakers better interpret federal regulations and possibly allow for greater amounts of septage to be safely applied to smaller areas of land. This controls the footprint of septage application, as less land would be required for the same amount of septage disposal, and it saves money for farmers and septage haulers/applicators who use septage to restore soil nitrogen content to sustain acceptable growing conditions for desired plants.

Michitsch says it is time for updated information about Wisconsin’s septage. Current standards are based on decades-old data on its nitrogen and phosphorus content. However, diets and household habits, such as choosing detergents that contain less phosphorus, have changed over time. The composition of today’s septage has likely changed along with them. Also, original data did not consider how the septage was treated in the hauling system nor how it was applied, and both of those can influence the amount of nitrogen that penetrates the soil.

“We can make better decisions when we have better data,” Michitsch said. “This funding will enable us to get a better understanding of Wisconsin septage so that we can adjust policy and practice to reflect our conditions here while still adhering to federal standards.”

Michitsch and his team will gather samples from 36 counties in the spring and summer of 2022. They will analyze the data in the fall and present their findings by the end of the year.

“We are glad to have been a part of the effort to ensure that this research continues,” Crim said. “I am also grateful for the opportunity to visit UW-Stevens Point and learn more about Professor Michitsch’s work as well as other initiatives on campus.”

In addition to spending time in Professor Michitsch's classroom, Secretary Crim learned about UW-Stevens Point sustainability initiatives, and she met with Chancellor Gibson, students, administration as well as campus sustainability, diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership.

The Department of Safety and Professional Services issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, runs the state fire prevention program, and maintains the award-winning Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to address the opioid epidemic. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.

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