

Info: The Central Sands Lakes Study

April 2019

Another Chapter in the “War over Water”

The Central Sands Lakes Study represents another chapter in the “War over Water.”¹ Simmering since the 1950s and boiling over following the 2011 *Lake Beulah* Supreme Court decision, the “War” pits lake and stream and wetland advocates against groundwater pumping interests. Water advocates support managing groundwater pumping consistent with healthy water bodies, while pumping interests demand unlimited pumping, no matter the consequences for lake and streams and wetlands.

The boil-over following *Beulah* started with a 2013 state budget provision prohibiting citizens from suing DNR over the cumulative impacts of high capacity well pumping. Then, in 2016, environmental reviews for high capacity wells ended when former Attorney General Schimel, at the behest of Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, opined DNR was prohibited from following *Beulah*’s directions. And in 2017, Act 10 was approved with an apparent intention of making high capacity well approvals virtually permanent and possibly privatizing Wisconsin’s groundwater to high-capacity well owners.

Also in 2017 Act 10 was a call for a new study in the Central Sands. That study is now well under way and scheduled for completion in 2021.

2017 Act 10 Study

The Act requires an analysis of pumping impacts in a select area of the Central Sands², specifically (paraphrasing):

1. Evaluating the hydrology and pumping impacts for Pleasant Lake, Plainfield Lake, Long Lake plus “... **any other navigable stream or navigable lake located in the designated study area...**” that DNR seeks to study for pumping impacts.
2. Determining if pumping is causing a “*significant reduction ... below average seasonal [water] levels...*”
3. Performing a field demonstration that shows connections between groundwater pumping and the significant reduction in water levels.
4. Proposing special measures to prevent or remedy water level reductions, if found.
5. Perform an economic analysis, if special measures are recommended, for specific businesses, business sectors, public utility ratepayers, local government units, and the state’s economy as a whole.
6. Preparing and submitting a report to the joint committee on finance and to the chief clerk of each house of the legislature.

The parameters of the study, and in fact, all of 2017 Act 10, were drafted by legislators and industry lobbyists, and not by scientists nor agency staff. And so the Act ignored the lengthy history of research that predicted and verified pumping impacts in the Central Sands and that surface water – groundwater – pumping connections were long ago verified in the Little Plover vicinity.

The price tag on the study is expected to be near \$1 million.

The Rollback

A bright spot of 2017 Act 10 was that it could have resulted in a broad evaluation of irrigation pumping impacts on over 20 lakes and dozens of stream miles around Plainfield and Coloma! But the list of studied water bodies

was rolled back to only three lakes - Long, Plainfield, and Pleasant – and no streams.³ Apparently powerful agriculture sector lobbyists controlled whether or not the legislature would actually fund the study, and under the threat of receiving no study funding, DNR was coerced to study only the minimum.

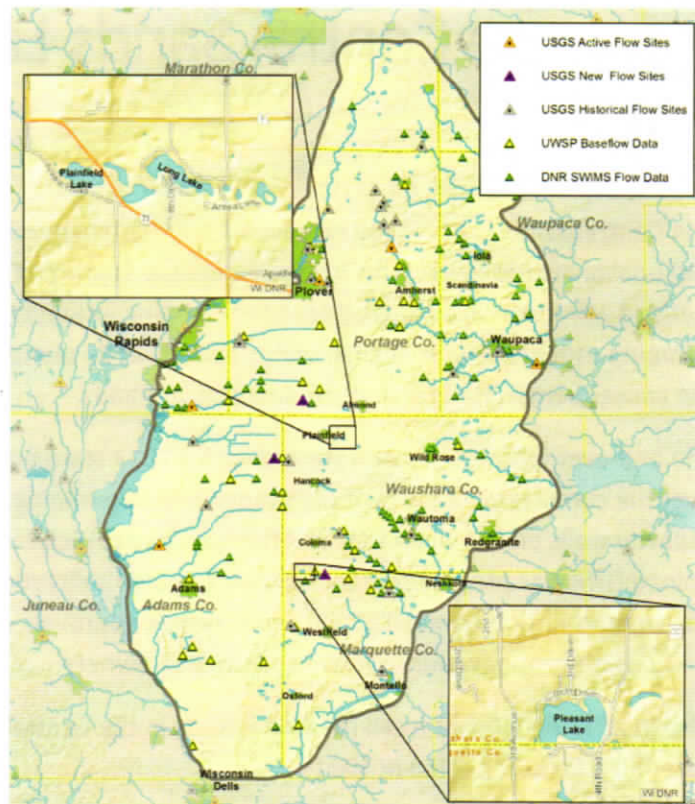
Where is the study at?

* The study must be concluded with a report to the legislature submitted by **June 3 2021**.

* A good deal of high-quality field work by DNR, WGNHS, USGS, and UWSP staff is occurring. This includes measuring streamflows, lake levels, groundwater levels, and drilling geologic borings. These data will inform updated groundwater flow models.

* The existing Central Sands groundwater flow model is being updated by USGS to add greater capabilities.

* DNR lake biologists are evaluating lake water level cycles and at what drawdown amounts the study lakes become significantly impacted.



The three study lakes and some water monitoring sites. (WDNR image.)

Citations and More information

1. Lee Bergquist (2016). Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/wisconsin/2016/09/03/war-over-water-land-plenty/89481060/>
2. Text of 2017 Act 10 <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2017/related/acts/10>
3. Scope or work for the study <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wells/documents/HighCap/CSLSSOW.pdf>
4. More study information <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wells/documents/HighCap/CSLSSOW.pdf>