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Bill Berry: Will we survive the current batch of 'environmental terrorists'?

By Bill Berry | state columnist Jun 25, 2018

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Lorrie Otto was one of the Wisconsin citizens instrumental in the fight to get DDT banned in the late 1960s.

PHOTO BY NEY TAIT FRASER

About the columnist



Bill Berry

Bill Berry is a self-employed writer and

In the midst of one of our country's most tumultuous years, 1968, a bold group of Wisconsin citizens banded together in efforts to ban DDT.

The pesticide was wreaking ecological havoc across

editor who contributes to state and national publications. His Capital Times columns cover an array of topics, but he specializes in conservation, agriculture and sustainable land use.



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much of the U.S. Cities, forests and farm fields were being doused with the broad-spectrum, long-lasting chemical that killed non-target species like songbirds, birds of prey, fish and other animals. Its threats to human health were unveiled by reporters like Whitney Gould in The Capital Times.

The Citizens Natural Resources Association of Wisconsin and the upstart Environmental Defense Fund joined to challenge DDT's use in a lengthy administrative hearing in Madison. They were up against the deep pockets of the chemical industry, but they were able to put DDT on trial before a national and international audience, and it worked. The public outcry led to a 1972 ban on use of the chemical in the U.S., ordered by William Ruckelshaus, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, newly created by President Richard Nixon.

The heroes of it all were average citizens like Lorrie Otto, the tireless and tough suburban Milwaukee housewife, scientists like Joseph Hickey and Hugh Iltis of UW-Madison, and scores of other citizens from across the state. It's a rich chapter in Wisconsin and U.S. environmental history, but its legacy is being torn apart by those in power today, both in Wisconsin and the country as a whole.

We are seeing the dismantling of Nixon's EPA by its current administrator, Scott Pruitt, whose audacity is beyond belief. In addition to spending lavishly on his own travel and comforts, one of his first acts on behalf of the Trump administration was to deny a ban on a particularly nasty modern-day pesticide, chlorpyrifos. The pesticide is a neurotoxin linked to an array of serious health risks in both children and

adults. Children, in particular, are at risk. Reduced IQs, attention disorders and memory problems have been documented. The chemical is also linked to heightened risks of lung cancer and immune disorders.

Pruitt's decision to ignore the recommendations of his own scientists came despite the agency's own research showing that children in some parts of the country were being exposed to unsafe levels of the chemical in drinking water and that residues of chlorpyrifos, the most commonly used pesticide in America, are found on food crops in excess of federal safety standards.

Of course, we know that the well-being of children isn't a priority for this administration and that the environment is an afterthought at best for the Trump administration and its acolytes in Wisconsin.

It's worth noting that while DDT's impact on birds was what aroused citizens in the 1960s, the Wisconsin administrative hearing challenged its use here on the grounds that it was polluting our waters, which it was.

Fifty years later, the situation still reeks in many cases. Just this month we learned the federal government will no longer pay for bottled water for residents of Flint, Michigan, where high levels of lead in drinking water caused by government malfeasance created a major health hazard and permanent brain damage to children. The water is still unsafe, but nonprofit groups are left to providing safe water now.

Here in Wisconsin, we are among national “leaders” when it comes to nitrate contamination of public and private wells, mostly caused by nitrogen fertilizers. In addition to choking infants, research now links nitrate to heightened levels of cancer. Meanwhile, pathogens from manure and other sources have contaminated scores of wells in Kewaunee County and elsewhere in northeastern Wisconsin.

Is the situation hopeless? Well, the contamination in Kewaunee County likely played a role in flipping the Senate seat won this month by Democrat Caleb Frostman. Also this month, Hawaii did what the EPA should have done. It banned the use of chlorpyrifos.

Will we survive the current batch of “environmental terrorists”? Maybe. Personally, I wish Lorrie Otto was still alive so I could watch her tear Pruitt apart.

Bill Berry of Stevens Point writes a semimonthly column for The Capital Times. billnick@charter.net

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