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**Honoring Wisconsin municipalities for their water conservation efforts**

*New Water Star program highlights innovative ideas for protecting and conserving water resources.*

Contact: Suzanne Wade (920)674-8972, [suzanne@jeffersoncountywi.gov](mailto:suzanne@jeffersoncountywi.gov)

Madison, Wis.—Wisconsin municipalities that go above federal and state regulations in their water conservation efforts are being recognized in a new program making its debut on Earth Day.

The program--Water Star--honors cities, villages, towns and counties that have taken important steps to protect surface water and groundwater, such as strengthening stormwater controls, ensuring water quality, protecting habitats and encouraging residents to conserve water.

Water Star program sponsors include the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Cooperative Extension, MSA Professional Services, Town and County RC&D, Rock River Coalition, UW-Extension Environmental Resources Center, Dane County, Natural Resources Consulting Inc. and Ruekert-Mielke.

“Too often we complain about what isn’t being done instead of celebrating the positive steps municipalities are taking,” said Suzanne Wade, a University of Wisconsin-Extension basin educator and Water Star coordinator. “I’m amazed at the local wisdom that these municipal staff and elected officials have used in solving problems. Water Star is one way for them to share their good work.”

Municipal representatives nominated to pilot test Water Star welcomed the opportunity to participate in a program that would recognize their communities’ conservation efforts and help them identify new ways of improving water resource protections.

The program has already begun to unveil the wide range of innovative ideas Wisconsin municipalities use to improve water resource protections and conservation.

Along the coast of Lake Michigan, for example, the city of Manitowoc has generated community interest in water resources and huge demand for rain barrels with public education. Manitowoc has promoted water conservation awareness with a storm drain stenciling program, rain garden demonstration site, educational paddling trips and a rain barrel workshop.

And in south-central Wisconsin, Fitchburg is installing a stormwater basin to protect marshlands from pollution and trash, and developing a plan to irrigate its Nine Springs Golf Course with wastewater effluent to conserve water.

Water Star determines how well municipalities meet the program's standards for water resource protections and designates participants as gold, silver or bronze star communities. Early evidence demonstrates that Wisconsin municipalities have the capacity to establish and achieve high conservation and protection goals.

Representatives from municipalities, the DNR, the University of Wisconsin-Extension and other organizations said they hoped that when the program begins to show how Wisconsin municipalities stack up, gold star-designated municipalities will inspire other municipalities to set loftier goals.

Jim Congdon, Upper Rock Watershed Department of Natural Resources supervisor, said opportunities for optimizing water resource protections include taking steps that go beyond DNR regulations.

Municipalities nominated to participate in the pilot testing of the Water Star application process represent some of Wisconsin's leading water conservation communities and are slated to receive recognitions. Pilot test participants included Fitchburg, Dane County and River Falls which will receive Gold Star Community recognition; Beloit, Mukwonago and Waukesha County which will receive Silver Star Community recognition; and Darlington and Manitowoc, which will receive Bronze Star Community recognition.

Municipalities interested in being part of the Water Star program can apply online at <http://www.waterstarwisconsin.org> beginning on Earth Day--April 22.