MAPPING A LEAD-FREE FUTURE IN MILWAUKEE

Understanding the connection between historical discrimination, housing insecurity and toxic lead exposure is key to building a healthier and more just future for residents of Wisconsin’s largest city.

Lead contamination is an issue that disproportionately affects lower-income families and communities of color in the United States. For young children, lead exposure can lead to lifelong health issues such as behavioral problems and learning disabilities.

In Wisconsin, lead contamination is particularly severe in the City of Milwaukee. Decades of disinvestment have contributed to disproportionately high rates of lead exposure among communities of color and lower-income families on the city’s north side.

Together with Coalition on Lead Emergency (COLE), MEA recently launched a new multi-media education and outreach tool that illustrates the connection between historical housing insecurity in Milwaukee and toxic lead exposure.

‘Living with Lead’ was designed by Caroline Griffith, a UW-Madison graduate student and a Mellon Public Humanities Fellow at MEA. Griffith used maps, videos, and audio interviews to show that lead contamination isn’t just tied to older housing stock and aging water infrastructure. Instead, the maps reveal the important role that racially discriminatory government-sanctioned housing policies have played in putting children in certain neighborhoods at greater risk than others.

A 2021 report from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services indicates that 6.7% of children tested in Milwaukee had blood lead levels at or above 3.5 micrograms per deciliter (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention definition for lead poisoning), compared to 3.7% statewide.

Milwaukee residents living with the impacts of lead contamination in their daily lives—including parents of lead-poisoned children—played a central role in the project. Their voices and stories are presented side-by-side with maps of the city showing how areas with high rates of childhood lead poisoning overlap with areas of historical redlining, frequent housing code violations and high rates of eviction.

Shy McElroy is a Milwaukee resident whose son was exposed to lead as a young child. She now works as a community organizer with COLE to educate other parents about the dangers of lead exposure.

Last fall, MEA helped COLE develop an ambitious proposal to invest American Rescue Plan Act funds in job training for lead abatement work in impacted neighborhoods. McElroy and other local residents successfully advocated for the proposal, and thanks to their grassroots advocacy, the Milwaukee Common Council has allocated $26 million to help impacted families remediate lead paint in their homes.

This spring and summer, Griffith, McElroy and other community organizers will use Living with Lead resources to continue to press for policy solutions to the lead crisis and to educate community members during a series of community outreach events in Milwaukee.

View the maps and learn more about the project here.

People don’t think things affect them until they hit home. Lead contamination is something that’s already home, and it’s going to continue to affect us until we have a voice.

Shy McElroy
Parent and Community Organizer
A Message from the Director
Tony Wilkin Gibart

This issue of the Advocacy Update features two MEA mapping projects. The first, which is featured on the front cover, illustrates how urban housing discrimination overlaps with childhood lead exposure and how these interlocking injustices affect the lives of individual Wisconsinites.

MEA’s new report on agricultural pollution, which you can read about on page three, is also built around maps that tell an alarming story—a story that reveals how rural landscapes surrounding industrial agriculture operations have been inundated with harmful contaminants, even as decision makers consider whether to allow some of those same operations to expand.

Conventional wisdom holds that there is a deep divide between urban and rural communities, but together these two mapping projects tell a very different story. Too many families in both urban and rural areas share similar concerns about the quality of their water and environment. The maps also show that both urban and rural environmental injustices are rooted in legal and policy decisions that have directly disadvantaged the people who call these places home.

Another element that binds together these communities is that they have MEA attorneys working by their sides to reverse the historical trends that impact their health and wellbeing. Indeed, these mapping projects are important tools that directly support the effectiveness of MEA’s community-focused legal advocacy.

With your help, we are standing with rural communities to obtain legal victories that secure their rights to clean water, just as we are working with urban residents to achieve policy outcomes that invest in the health of their communities. Thank you for making all this, and more, possible.

Tony Wilkin Gibart
Executive Director

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Contributions 43%  
Fees 2%  
Grants 54%  
Fundraising 10%  
Mgmt. & General 5%  
Program 85%
APPEALS COURT VICTORY PREVENTS DESTRUCTION OF RARE WETLANDS

In December, the Wisconsin Court of Appeals ruled in favor of MEA, our client, the Ho-Chunk Nation, and Clean Wisconsin in a decision that continues to prevent frac sand company Meteor Timber from destroying rare wetlands in Monroe County. The appeals court affirmed a lower court decision which found that the DNR violated state law when it issued a wetland fill permit to Meteor Timber in 2017. The company had sought the permit in order to build an industrial sand processing facility on ancestral Ho-Chunk lands. Meteor Timber has petitioned the State Supreme Court to hear the case. We believe the court should reject the petition, but we are prepared to defend our previous legal victories if necessary.

CIRCUIT COURT WIN ALLOWS MEA OPEN RECORDS LAWSUIT TO MOVE FORWARD

On March 8, a Dane County court sided with MEA when it rejected a motion by Dr. Frederick Prehn, a member of the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board (NRB), to dismiss a lawsuit filed by MEA in October. Our lawsuit asks the court to compel Dr. Prehn to turn over all communications related to his refusal to step down from the board after the expiration of his term. Dr. Prehn had asked the court to dismiss the lawsuit, claiming his communications with lobbyists and politicians about his refusal to step down aren’t subject to Wisconsin’s Public Records Law. The court’s decision allows the case to move forward, and it makes clear that Dr. Prehn is accountable to the law, just like any other public official.

DECISION IN WMC TOXIC CHEMICAL LAWSUIT EXPECTED IN APRIL

A decision is expected in April in a case that threatens to fundamentally undermine the Wisconsin Spills Law—a bedrock environmental and public health protection that keeps Wisconsinites safe from exposure to PFAS and other hazardous substances. The case began when Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce sued the DNR to limit the agency’s ability to investigate toxic contamination and require responsible parties to clean up contaminated sites. MEA has been participating in the case to defend the Spills Law on behalf of our clients, Citizens for a Clean Wausau, Clean Water Action Council of Northeast Wisconsin, River Alliance of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Environmental Health Network, and Doug Oitzinger, a former mayor of Marinette.

"This legal victory validates the commitment of the Ho-Chunk Nation to protecting these lands, our natural resources, and our community."


*The generosity of MEA donors has been critical to sustaining our participation in these cases. Thank you!*
MEA INVESTIGATION FINDS THERE’S NOT ENOUGH LAND TO SAFELY DISPOSE OF CAFO MANURE IN NORTHEAST WISCONSIN AND THE CENTRAL SANDS

A new report by MEA and Environmental Working Group (EWG) finds that in some areas of the state, including Kewaunee County and portions of the Central Sands, there is not enough land to safely dispose of the manure generated by animal feeding operations. The report raises concerns about the potential expansion of industrial-scale livestock operations in areas that are already grappling with drinking water pollution. EWG and MEA modeled current rates of application for fertilizer and animal manure in nine Wisconsin counties. The analysis, which is the first of its kind in Wisconsin, shows that fertilizer and manure are being applied to farmland at rates that exceed crop needs and that pollute water resources. This research supports MEA’s legal advocacy on behalf of communities whose drinking water has been contaminated by industrial agriculture. Visit midwestadvocates.org/ewg-report to learn what residents of Kewaunee and Portage Counties are saying about the report and why they think the report’s findings should be considered by the DNR as the agency decides whether to modify the permits of some of the state’s biggest farms.

“The report by MEA and EWG shows that our water quality won’t improve on its own. We’re counting on the DNR to use its authority to protect our drinking water.”

-Katy Bailey, Portage County

LINE 5 ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW DRAWS WIDESPREAD PUBLIC CRITICISM

The Wisconsin DNR has released a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Enbridge Energy’s proposal to build a new section of its Line 5 oil pipeline in northern Wisconsin. MEA is committed to holding Enbridge’s proposal to the highest possible standard of environmental review. We believe Wisconsinites deserve a meaningful and thorough assessment of how their communities and the surrounding landscape would be harmed by this project. During a 10-hour hearing in early February, hundreds of people, including MEA attorney Rob Lee and law clerk Raj Grewal, provided detailed testimony about the shortcomings of the draft EIS and how the project would harm natural resources, threaten public health and destabilize the climate. Thousands more have submitted written feedback. An overwhelming majority say the DNR failed to adequately analyze and inform the public of the potential harm the project could cause. The DNR will now consider public feedback before issuing a final EIS.
Despite the serious health risks associated with PFAS exposure, many local officials in Wisconsin have been reluctant to undertake comprehensive testing of municipal water supplies. That’s why MEA has created a new guide to help you talk with elected officials and water utility operators in your community about the important role they play in protecting public health. Our guide gives you the information you need to move local officials to take action. Find the guide, along with other helpful information, at pfasfree.org.

What are the legal mechanisms that allow the government to protect Wisconsin communities and landscapes? Why should Wisconsin residents care about permitting and administrative rulemaking? To help answer those questions, the producers of a podcast called ‘Edge Effects’ spoke with MEA Executive Director Tony Wilkin Gibart and members of the Marinette and Kewaunee County communities. The episode is the first in a series highlighting issues of environmental justice in Wisconsin. Listen online or find the conversation at bit.ly/edge-effects.

Making a planned gift to MEA is an investment in the future of environmental protection in Wisconsin. Planned gifts come in many shapes and sizes. Every gift is valued and every gift makes a difference in our work to protect public health and the environment!

**Bequests**
A bequest is a gift made through your will or trust. It is one of the most popular and flexible ways to make a planned gift.

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Consider making MEA a beneficiary of a retirement, investment or bank account or a life insurance policy.

**Gifts that provide income**
Charitable annuities and charitable remainder trusts allow you to provide income for yourself or your loved ones while supporting MEA’s work.

Learn more at midwestadvocates.org/planned-giving
To discuss a way to support our work that’s right for you, contact Peg Sheaffer, Director of Development, at (608) 251-5047 x 3 or psheaffer@midwestadvocates.org.

*We have been long time supporters of Midwest Environmental Advocates. The work that MEA does is important to us and vital to the people they serve. That is why we have chosen to include MEA in our estate plans.*

-Dave & Sue Clausen
Amery, WI

Join our Legacy Circle by including MEA in your estate plans!
THANK YOU TO OUR 2021 DONORS!

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