

Building an Aquifer Recharge Strategy for Will County: Momentum Grows After November Stakeholder Meeting

Regional collaboration took an important step forward on November 12 as local government leaders, utilities, industry representatives, and environmental organizations gathered at the Three Rivers Manufacturers' Association to advance a long-term aquifer recharge strategy for Will County. The meeting, co-hosted by TRMA and the Will County Environmental Network, focused on feasibility, governance, and next steps for Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR) in the shallow aquifer system.

The morning began with a networking breakfast generously sponsored by ExxonMobil, Joliet Refinery.

Clarifying Aquifer Conditions

Participants began by distinguishing between the county's deep and shallow aquifers, noting that most new shallow wells are drilled between 150 and 175 feet. This clarification helps shape recharge planning and future water-supply modeling.

Improving Data Accuracy and Oversight

A recurring theme was the need for consistent and transparent data. Differences between municipal and state datasets—often stemming from reporting variations or intentional production reductions—have created uncertainty. The Illinois State Water Survey shared that ongoing discussions with Illinois EPA aim to strengthen coordination and define which agency should guide aquifer recharge targets.

Industry, Environmental, and Community Perspectives

Stakeholders expressed strong interest in integrating water reuse into recharge planning, including capturing treated process water. Others highlighted public perception challenges, sometimes referred to as the "poop factor," when discussing the use of treated wastewater for recharge. Successful large-scale projects in places like Orange County, California, served as helpful examples. Participants also agreed that reliable water supply is essential for both economic growth and community resilience.

Selecting the Right Recharge Sites

Water quality, PFAS concerns, and land-use changes were major considerations. As more farmland is converted into warehouse developments, infiltration opportunities diminish—especially when retention ponds are clay-lined rather than designed for groundwater recharge. Participants emphasized the need for clear, science-based criteria for evaluating potential MAR sites.

Economic Development Tied to Water Availability

Doug Pryor, President & CEO of the Will County Center for Economic Development, underscored how water access shapes the region's economic future. Global demand for water is projected to increase dramatically, and key growth industries—battery manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and indoor agriculture—are already expanding in Will County. Pryor noted that long-term competitiveness depends on responsibly managing water, power, and workforce resources.

Seeing Stormwater as a Resource

Environmental planner Rachel Havrelock encouraged stakeholders to rethink stormwater as an asset. Diverting stormwater to rivers and canals counts against Illinois' Lake Michigan allocation, creating both compliance and sustainability incentives to capture stormwater for recharge.

For more information contact Ray Woodworth at ray.woodworth@trma.org