

WATER UTILITIES | STATE REPORT CARD

## Madison gets high marks in Wisconsin's first drinking water report cards

David Wahlberg | Wisconsin State Journal

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**T**he Madison Water Utility got A's for water quality and communications and B's for finances and infrastructure in **Wisconsin's first water utility report cards**, designed by a UW-Madison researcher.



Teodoro

More than 92% of the state's 572 utilities got A's for water quality. But **more than a quarter got D's or F's** in the finance category and 22% got D's or F's for infrastructure and operations.

"On the thing that probably matters the most, drinking water health and safety, our utilities are, with a very few exceptions, doing extraordinary well," said Manuel Teodoro, a professor in UW's La Follette School of Public Affairs, who compiled the report cards.

But "I worry about whether we can retain those health numbers if our infrastructure and finance numbers aren't where they need to be," Teodoro said.

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A \$9 million project, expected to be finished by fall, is reducing naturally occurring radium, iron and manganese at the Madison Water Utility's Well 19, at 2526 Lake Mendota Drive.

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The report cards are based on 2022 and 2023 data from the Wisconsin Public Service Commission, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and information collected by Teodoro and his research team. They are meant to bring more attention to water utilities and the resources they need, Teodoro said.

“These systems are essential and life-sustaining, and they sustain our entire economy, our society, but they’re so invisible,” he said. “We’re trying to make these invisible systems more visible before they suffer catastrophic failures that can hurt people.”

Madison had **high scores for water quality**, with low levels or no detection of most contaminants. But the utility scored somewhat lower for some pollutants, including radium, lead, nitrate, tetrachloroethylene and total coliform, a group of bacteria.

“When you have a large utility like ours, you can’t always be perfect,” utility spokesperson Marcus Pearson said.

A \$9 million **project to reduce naturally occurring radium**, iron and manganese at Well 19, at 2526 Lake Mendota Drive, is expected to be done by this fall, Pearson said. He said the city’s **lead pipes have been replaced with copper**, only one sample among thousands tested positive for coliform in recent years and the utility is looking at lowering Well 18, on Park Street, to reduce tetrachlorethylene there.

Levels of PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances known as “forever chemicals,” were not evaluated in the report cards because they weren’t regulated at the federal level until last year, after the data was collected. Teodoro said future report cards will include PFAS, long used in products such as carpets, cookware and firefighting foam and linked to some cancers.

Low levels of some PFAS have been **detected at least once in 16 of Madison’s wells**. The levels exceeded standards only at Well 15, at 3900 E. Washington Ave., which is not being used because of the PFAS contamination. A \$5.9 million **project to install PFAS treatment equipment** is expected to be finished this summer.





Work on Well 19 is one of two ongoing construction projects at the Madison Water Utility. The other is installing equipment to remove PFAS chemicals and volatile organic compounds at Well 15, at 3900 E. Washington Ave.

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The Madison utility got high scores for regulatory compliance, operating expenses and return on equity. But its scores were lower for water loss, main and service breaks, the age of its water mains and its debt to assets ratio.

Pearson said the Public Service Commission in 2023 authorized the utility to spend \$5 million to replace water mains, and the utility has applied to spend \$10 million for more replacements starting in 2026. The utility's debt has been reduced from \$282 million in 2018 to \$187 million in 2024, he said.

"We're continuously re-investing in our infrastructure to make sure that we're able to provide high quality water," Pearson said.

Madison was one of only two utilities, along with Green Bay, to get a perfect score in communications, based on information available on websites, use of social media and the public's ability to interact with utility staff.

More than half of utilities got a failing grade in communications.

In the Madison metro area, **Fitchburg got all A's** and **Middleton, Monona and Verona** got A's and B's. Waunakee and McFarland, which mostly got A's and B's, scored lower in communications, with **Waunakee receiving a C** and **McFarland a D**.

Sun Prairie, which got A's and a B in other categories, **received an F for water quality** due to at least one recent violation. In 2023, the city notified about 9,000 customers that an **equipment malfunction caused fluoride levels in some city water to exceed** state and federal safe drinking water standards but resulted in no immediate danger to public health.



Work at Madison's Well 19, near Frautschi Point by Lake Mendota, is expected to greatly reduce levels of radium, which have nearly exceeded federal standards at the well.

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