

**2024 Nomination - Outstanding Conservation Employee
Technician/Planner/Project Manager/ GIS Specialist/Agronomist**

Nominee:

Jennifer McNelly, Water Resource Specialist
Portage County Planning and Zoning Department/Land and Water Conservation Division
1462 Strongs Avenue, Stevens Point WI 54481
mcnellyj@co.portage.wi.gov 715-346-1334

Education and background, past and present career responsibilities, level of professional knowledge and ability:

- BS in Environmental Education, minor in Youth Camp Management. Masters Degree in Watershed Management – University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.
- Hired as Portage County Water Resource Specialist in 2015.
- Coordinates, organizes, and evaluates all Portage County water resource data for the Planning and Zoning Department/Land and Water Conservation Division, with a primary focus on groundwater.
- Provides information to communities, the public and elected officials on groundwater management, protection, and on methods to resolve water resource issues or problems in Portage County.
- Assists residents with information needs regarding drinking water quality and safety and is the primary position in Portage County responsible for carrying out Planning and Zoning Department/Land and Water Conservation Division programs and initiatives to implement the County's adopted Groundwater Management Plan and associated programs.
- Provide staff assistance and recommendations to the Portage County Groundwater Citizens Advisory Committee.
- Develop and gather informational materials for distribution to County residents on water resource issues.
- Work with, advise and provide educational programming to public officials, units of government, general public, and other City/County agencies on groundwater management and protection strategies and needs.
- Develop or contribute to the development of implementation tools and ordinances for protection of groundwater, including zoning and wellhead protection ordinances, well abandonment ordinance, private on-site waste treatment system ordinance, management practice plans, etc.
- Conduct groundwater and well monitoring for Portage County, evaluate water resource data, and make recommendations regarding methods to resolve water resource issues and problems.

Nominators:

Tracy Arnold and Patty Benedict, Portage County Land and Water Conservation Division, 1462 Strongs Avenue, Stevens Point WI 54481 – arnoldt@co.portage.wi.gov benedicp@co.portage.wi.gov 715-346-1334

Summary: (five sentences or less)

Jen has been working with water resources her entire career, gaining and sharing endless knowledge and information on this valuable resource. She is the “go to” person for all things H₂O. One of her many accomplishments is participating on the team of people that created a Lake Management Plan for every lake in Portage County. Lake Districts and Associations consistently reach out to her for her vast knowledge of lake ecosystems and how they each interact with groundwater. Her understanding of the entire County makes her an incredible asset to the citizens, professional community, and coworkers.

Criteria/Guidelines:

Jen McNelly is remarkable at acclimating and adapting. Every task assigned by the Planning and Zoning and Land and Water Conservation Committees is taken on with great professionalism. These tasks are extremely complex and multi-faceted. Jen has the knowledge and background to give expert answers that are extremely helpful to every staff member in the department.

In 2022, Jen submitted multiple applications for State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) for water quality projects to improve access to and provide safe drinking water for County residents. She secured funding for the installation and sampling of seven cluster monitoring wells to help determine where safe drinking water could be obtained. She began collecting quarterly samples from seven depths in each of the wells installed in the spring of 2023, submits to water laboratories, receives the test results, assembles and shares the data with officials and the public.

Jen assists with running a program to provide reverse osmosis systems and no cost water tests for county residents. She is working with DATCP on installation of monitoring wells on a new solar development site in Portage County. She has assisted numerous homeowners to complete and submit applications for the State well compensation grant program. She is tireless when it comes to providing access to clean water for all.

Jen is a staff representative on the Central Sands Groundwater County Coalition (CSGCC), a six-county collaborative group working toward improving groundwater quality in the Central Sands area. Jen was instrumental in writing the grant received to compile and evaluate nitrate-nitrogen and neonicotinoid data and research within the CSGCC.

She continues to coordinate nitrate screening events throughout county, collecting hundreds of samples, following through with testing, and providing results to landowners.

Jen was co-author of the current issue topic for the Wisconsin Envirothon in 2021. She has been a speaking contest judge at the local and State levels. Her judging style provides positive comments and gentle critiques. She has presented at the WI Land+Water conference several times.

Jen educates, coordinates, and oversees citizen volunteers collecting lake level and stream baseflow data. She collects and maintains hydrograph well information in the county database.

She is part of a team researching potential solutions and searching for funding to address contaminants in private wells and transient non-community drinking water systems. This has been a hot button issue, for which Jen has been instrumental in providing statistics and expertise toward a hopeful resolution.

In her "spare" time, Jen serves on the board for Recycling Connections, a nonprofit connecting people, resources, and communities to promote waste reduction, reuse, recycling and resource conservation.

Jen is a fierce advocate for water quality for Portage County, Wisconsin, and nationwide. "It is only our dedication towards our passion that distinguishes a champion from the crowd." Jen McNelly is a Water Resource Champion. For her dedication, fortitude, and tenacity in the preservation and protection of a valued resource, please consider Jen McNelly for the 2024 Outstanding Conservation Employee in the Technician/Planner/Project Manager/GIS Specialist/Agronomist category.

Testimonials:

“As the state representative for the 71st Assembly District in Portage County, I have worked with Jen McNelly on water quality issues since 2015, for as long as she has served Portage County. Jen is indefatigable in her mission to support the community members of Portage County in accessing clean drinking water. Having personally attended many local and regional groundwater meetings that Jen was leading or co-leading, I have witnessed her grace under pressure, informed expertise, and fearless advocacy for the people of our community.

As the Vice Chair of the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality, I worked closely with Jen to shape public policy. She has always provided valuable insights to the contamination issues facing our local communities, from launching water quality testing programs to championing the remediation of contaminated private wells on the local and state level. Jen has engaged vital stakeholders to set in motion significant progress on improving groundwater quality on the local, regional, and state level. When the going gets tough, Jen gets to work and yields real impact. There is no one more hard-working, thoughtful, persistent, and mission-focused than Jen McNelly, a true conservation champion. I am proud to submit my strong support for her nomination as the 2024 Outstanding Conservation Employee.”

Representative Katrina Shankland
71st Assembly District

As the Portage County Water Resource Specialist, Jen is on the forefront of groundwater quality concerns for the County. Jen works to bring all opinions to the table on what can and often is a controversial and complicated topic. Helping stakeholders remember that the goal of all involved is to improve Portage County’s water quality has been the common denominator in Jen’s approach to bringing different voices together to talk about the sometime competing approaches to solutions to this ever-concerning problem that affects the environment, community health and overall welfare. Jen is an excellent advocate for Portage County and our water resources.

Tim Reed, Portage County Planning and Zoning Director

“Jen is passionate and extremely knowledgeable about what she does. When talking to people about water resource issues, Jen has the ability to simplify sometimes complicated concepts and explain them in such a way which is understandable to both seasoned professionals and the general public. Even in the face of naysayers, she earns respect by displaying patience and understanding. She is a professional always.”

Dan Bowers, Portage County Planning and Zoning Assistant Director

“Jen is dedicated to improving Portage County’s groundwater and strives to help educate those in the community in the process. Her continued efforts with the Groundwater Citizens Advisory Committee certainly do not go unnoticed as other counties have commented and started following suit. This award would bring more attention/appreciation to what we already know, Jen is amazing at what she does.”

Amy Heins, Portage County Planning and Zoning Administrative Associate

“Since Jen assumed the role of Water Resource Specialist, she has taken on some large tasks – among them, updating the Groundwater Management Plan, revisions to the Wellhead Protection Ordinance, assisting with the Land and Water Resource Management Plan update, conducting countywide Well Water Quality Project studies, a Water Quality Monitoring Project for one of the villages in the county, and ongoing hydrograph well, stream and lake level monitoring. She has enthusiastically volunteered to judge the local and State speaking contests. Her style of judging puts speakers at ease as she relays positive comments and gentle critiques. Jen’s extensive knowledge and passion are a valuable asset to not only Portage County and its citizens but shared with Central Wisconsin and beyond. To call Jen an outdoor enthusiast would be a gross understatement. Family vacations and weekends are spent camping, hiking, fishing, and exploring county, state, and national parks. She and her husband share their respect and love of natural resources with their two girls.”

Patty Benedict, Portage County Land and Water Conservation Division Administrative Associate

“Jen has the ability to recognize the intricacies of delicate water resource issues and work with all stake holders.”

Steve Bradley, Portage County Conservationist

“Jen’s extensive knowledge, experience, and genuine dedication to water conservation shines through not only as the Portage County Water Resource Specialist, but in her day-to-day life as well. Jen is able to educate school age children as well as people of all ages in a variety of ways that keeps them excited about water conservation. Jen is very respected amongst her peers in the field of Water Conservation as well as Local and State elected officials as she has often been asked to speak in front of them. Portage County and the State of Wisconsin are better for having someone like Jen who truly cares and is dedicated to the future of water conservation.”

Gayle Stewart, Portage County Planning and Zoning Administrative Associate

Having worked with Jen over the last several years, I've noticed that she possesses traits shared by some of our greatest leaders. The ability to lead a group of individuals, all with their own interests and agenda, is not an easy task. Some of the issues and conversations our Committee has covered have been controversial. She can effortlessly steer our Committee to stay on task and manage our time efficiently. I am thankful to have her on our Committee and she is a valuable asset to the county. Her knowledge and expertise are greatly appreciated by all that have the opportunity to work with her.

Ed Burns, Chair
Portage County Groundwater Citizens Advisory Committee

Jen has been an invaluable asset in portraying her knowledge about groundwater through hands on activities for local youth. It was inspiring to see students engage with her as she taught them to build their own aquifer. The older students got to experiment with her groundwater models and loved it. We look forward to working her on future educational programs.

John and Melissa Eron
Farmers of the Mill Creek Watershed Council and Eron’s Event Barn

Youth Education Committee Quote:

“Jen has always been willing to jump in and volunteer with the WI Envirothon. It doesn't matter the volunteer position, Jen will knock it out of the park! She is an asset to our statewide event and without her background and expertise, the students would not get the experience they do!”

Tracy Arnold, WI Land+Water Youth Education Committee Chair

2023 OUTSTANDING CONSERVATION EMPLOYEE AWARDS

Dear Committee;

I am writing to enthusiastically nominate Jen McNelly, Portage County Water Resource Specialist for your Outstanding Conservation Employee Award under the Technician/Planner/Project Manager/GIS Specialist/Agronomist categories.

I have known Jen for several decades in a variety of roles, but most recently as our county Water Resource Specialist. As a retired Geoscientist, former County Supervisor, and current Town Supervisor, I regularly work with Jen on groundwater related issues and research across Portage County. I have witnessed first hand her dedication to protecting water resources and reversing contamination among a host of related issues. I also worked with her predecessor in her position, and am extremely impressed with her ability to take those earlier efforts to delineate water quality and quantity issues and create an impressive, thoughtful and importantly workable Groundwater Management Plan for Portage County.

I recently assisted Jen and another colleague on well logging/ geologic analysis of seven monitoring wells installed in a local community. Jen's field abilities, critical thinking skills, competence...and admirable weather resistance were stellar.

I have also routinely reached out to Jen over the years for detailed well reports and hydrological data for residents who reached out to me for input on well placement, suggested depth, know contamination levels, and basic groundwater mapping. Although some of these requests were arguably beyond the needed scope of her position, she always graciously and quickly provided comprehensive data for both elected officials and the public. Her public service record is evidenced by the countless hours she puts in at county fairs, public concerts and multiple other events offering groundwater sampling on the spot and dispensing critical protective and educational materials to the public. Jen also serves as a resource and organizer for the Portage County Groundwater Citizens Advisory Committee, a citizen-led group actively working towards understanding and mitigating threats to groundwater across Portage County.

Jen is additionally a regular and polished public speaker with an ability to simplify complex data and present scientific principles in a jargon-free, publicly consumable way. For me this epitomizes qualities of both an excellent scientist, but also those of a staff member who clearly goes above and beyond the duties of her position.

I know Jen also moderates sessions and presents at meetings and professional conferences. I'm also familiar with her rapport with colleagues across the state and beyond and her ability to network well with various agencies, an indispensable skill in her position.

Jen is one of those rare unsung county employees who is beloved by staff and residents, beyond competent in her position, unfaltering in her beliefs and ethics, accurate in her data, dedicated to public outreach and most importantly approachable and honest in her dealings with the public. I simply cannot imagine some one more deserving of this award.

Best,

Ray P Reser PhD, RPA
Town of New Hope Supervisor
Emeritus Professor of Archaeology
Geography Geology Dept.
Curator of Anthropology
UWSP Museum of Natural History
[University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point](#)
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University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

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December 22, 2023

Dear Wisconsin Land+Water Conservation Awards Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to provide a letter in support of Jen McNelly's nomination for the Outstanding Conservation Employee Technician/Planner/Project Manager/GIS Specialist/Agronomist Award. I have been fortunate to have collaborated with Jen in her role as Water Resource Specialist for Portage County Planning and Zoning Department; including her work with well testing, data interpretation and analysis, and other outreach efforts.

Finding the balance between clean drinking water and land use is one of the grand water challenges; and there are few places in Wisconsin where land and water quality intersect more than Portage County. I have always admired the thoughtful leadership and technical assistance that Jen provides to the residents and local officials in Portage County on these important issues.

The past couple of years in particular, Jen has gone above and beyond in her role as a water resources specialist. She has been instrumental in securing and directing funding to residents with well testing and other assistance. These efforts have resulted in hundreds of residents obtaining well testing and interpretation. For those with unsafe levels of nitrate, Jen has been instrumental in helping them obtain financial assistance to obtain water treatment systems to ensure families can drink water from their private wells.

It is also important to highlight Jen's strong track record in education and her ability to present technical information in ways that make it easy to understand. Nowhere is this more evident than in her work with youth audiences, where she routinely uses her talents and skills to prepare the next generation of conservation leaders.

This is only a snapshot of Jen's commitment to her colleagues, community, and Wisconsin's land and water resources. I hope that you will consider Jen McNelly as someone worthy of recognition for this prestigious award. If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kevin Masarik".

Kevin Masarik



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Jen McNelly – Conservation Employee Award

Professional Improvement Committee
121 S. Pinckney St., Suite 420
Madison, WI 53703

I've had the pleasure of working with Jen as our Central Sands Groundwater County Collaborative (CSGCC) developed. The CSGCC consists of Adams, Juneau, Marquette, Portage, Waushara, and Wood counties along with UW-EXT, NRCS, to improve groundwater in the central sands region. Jen, alongside the other five county conservationists were successful in acquiring grant money to begin this effort.

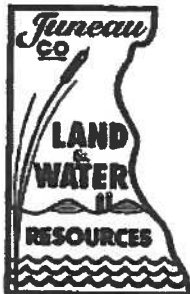
The project hired a "Post-doc" with a hydrogeology background to begin mining private well water test results. Additionally, the project required an "Investigator" from the University of WI Madison-Extension to facilitate and communicate the needs of the collaborative as well as meeting project objectives. When this Investigator left the project early, it was Jen who stepped up to fill this role. Her leadership, technical knowledge, and ability to work with a variety of conservation professionals are the determining factors why this project has been successful.

Jen continues to demonstrate leadership serving on both the technical and communication teams of the CSGCC. As the communications team leader, she was instrumental in developing a strategy for releasing information collected from the project. Additionally, the communications team developed a brochure that is available on each participating county's website.

Jen is very deserving of this award, in my time working with Jen she has gone above and beyond making the CSGCC group successful. Jen's initiative and creativity has made impacts not only in Portage county but with every county she has assisted through this project.



Dustin Ladd
Juneau County Conservationist
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Mauston, WI 53948
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Letter of Support for Nomination of
Jennifer McNelly
as 2024 Outstanding Conservation Employee

George J Kraft PhD. PH
Professor Emeritus & Public Service Hydrologist

December 20 2023

What should we expect from an Outstanding Conservation Employee?

For starters: A command of subjects involving water, soil, agriculture, and all things environment. Hard work, smart efforts. Ability to manage projects. Truly caring about people who suffer because of polluted drinking water and degraded lakes and streams. Respect for all, even those who disagree with you. A superb ability to communicate with the public, agency staff, and elected officials.

Jen has all this in spades. But I bet there are many seasoned conservation employees who also demonstrate excellence in these matters.

So let me put forward something that particularly distinguishes Jen: *COURAGE*.

Let me explain.

Jen has the distinction and difficulty of working in a county with some of the worst groundwater quality in the state. Some 20-25% of wells exceed the nitrate standard. Multiple municipal and other public water systems are challenged by high nitrate. Other water problems abound, like high capacity well pumping depleting county lakes and streams.

These subjects are wildly unpopular with certain sectors in her county (I know because I live here too). And if the subjects are unpopular, talking about them is close to taboo. But Jen's job is to address these concerns, and you can't address something if you can't talk about it.

What is a good Conservation Employee supposed to do? The easy thing would be to do nothing - go along to get along, make your job easy. Or you do your job and accept what's coming.

This dilemma recently played out with nitrate pollution in Nelsonville, a Village of 150 souls where half the residential wells exceed the nitrate standard. Nelsonville residents came to the county practically begging for help in solving their unsafe drinking water problem. This triggered the ire of certain elected officials and industry members.

Jen chose to do her job and help those afflicted with poor water. She helped them get their water tested and helped them see where safe water might be found (spoiler: it often is not found because high nitrate penetrates the entire aquifer). She managed an investigation that includes a monitoring well drilling program to see if/where safe water exists. She identified funds that helped some get safe water.

In doing her job, Jen demonstrated great *COURAGE*.

There have been consequences. Threats to her job and harassment by some elected officials and industry interests. It's taken a toll on Jen. Yet she perseveres.

This becomes more remarkable. I can imagine that it would be easy for one to become cynical and mean when badgered for doing the right thing (and what's more right than getting people clean water?). Jen hasn't. She has demonstrated class and treats critics with respect, moving forward step by step in addressing Nelsonville and other Portage County water problems.

It is a testament to Jen that she has the respect and draws support in some of the most respected experts in the state in addressing water issues. People that include me, Dr. Kevin Masarik of UW-Extension; Dr. Dave Hart of the Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey; and Dr. Ken Bradbury, Emeritus Director of the WGNHS. This adds to the credibility and veracity of her work.

For being competent, hardworking, and demonstrating courage in serving the public, Jen McNelly is an excellent candidate for your award.

To: WI Land+Water Professional Improvement Committee

From: Ed Hernandez, Waushara County Conservationist

Re: 2024 Outstanding Conservation Employee of the Year Nomination for Jen McNelly, Portage County Water Resource Specialist

I've had the pleasure of working with Jen McNelly as our Central Sands Groundwater County Collaborative (CSGCC) developed. The CSGCC consists of Adams, Juneau, Marquette, Portage, Waushara, and Wood counties, assisted by UW-EXT, NRCS, DATCP, WI Geologic & Natural History Survey, WI DNR, and US Geologic Survey, to improve groundwater in the Central Sands region. Jen, alongside the five county conservationists, were successful in acquiring grant money to begin this effort.

The project hired a Post-doctoral student with a hydrogeology background to begin mining private well water test results. Additionally, the project required an "Investigator" from the University of WI Madison-Extension to facilitate and communicate the needs of the collaborative as well as meeting project objectives. When this Investigator left the project early, it was Jen who stepped up to fill this role. Her leadership, technical knowledge, and ability to work with a variety of conservation professionals are the determining factors why this project has been successful.

Jen continues to demonstrate leadership, serving on both the technical and communication teams of the CSGCC. As the communications team leader, she was instrumental in developing a strategy for releasing information collected from the project. Additionally, the communications team developed a brochure that is available on each participating county's website.