

**2023 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.us](mailto:mcnellyj@co.portage.wi.us) 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 Quality 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](mailto:arnoldt@co.portage.wi.gov) [benedicp@co.portage.wi.gov](mailto: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 H<sub>2</sub>O. 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:**

The past crazy years found many of us juggling work, family and life in so many unique and different ways. Jennifer McNelly is remarkable at rolling with every punch sent her way. Every task the Planning and Zoning and Land and Water Conservation Committees asks her to complete, she does so willingly. These tasks are extremely complex and multi-faceted. When Jen is assigned a task, she gives it 120% before she signs her name to submit it. Anytime staff has a water related question, Jen has the knowledge and background to give an expert answer that is extremely helpful to every staff member in the department.

In 2022, Jen was tasked with submitting multiple applications for State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) for water quality projects to improve access to and provide safe drinking water for Portage County residents. Jen logged many hours, not only for the application process, but providing education to residents and businesses and updating databases. 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 Central Sands Region.

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

Jen is always willing to pitch in and share her passion for educating youth and colleagues. She 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 style of judging puts speakers at ease as she relays positive comments and gentle critiques. She has been a presenter at the WI Land+Water conference several times.

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

Currently, 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.

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.

Jen is a fierce advocate for water quality not only for Portage County, but state and nationwide. It has been said "It is only our dedication towards our passion that distinguishes a champion from the crowd." Jennifer McNelly is a Water Resource Champion. For her dedication, fortitude, and tenacity in the preservation and protection of one of our most valued resources, please consider Jen McNelly for the 2022 Outstanding Conservation Employee in the Technician/Planner/Project Manager/GIS Specialist/Agronomist category.

### **Testimonials:**

“As the state representative for the 71<sup>st</sup> 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 2022 Outstanding Conservation Employee.”

Representative Katrina Shankland  
71<sup>st</sup> 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

“In the relatively short time 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 a countywide Well Water Quality Project Study and 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 Portage County and its citizens.”

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. Even in these challenging times of in-person and remote schooling, 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