

Following the release of [*RENEW THE BLUE: A Community Guide for Cleaner Lakes & Beaches in the Yahara Watershed*](#), Dane County Executive Joe Parisi introduced a [2023 budget proposal](#) that promises to be a potential game changer for our lakes.

Through an initial \$3 million investment, if approved, the proposal would effectively lay the groundwork for the design and siting of a third, regional facility to turn cow manure into renewable energy and marketable fertilizer and compost products, making it easier to export phosphorus from the watershed. The longer-term aim is to **quadruple the volume of manure treatment** in the Yahara River Watershed's headwaters north of Lake Mendota, advancing a top-priority, *Renew the Blue* recommendation.

If you read no further...

- The two manure digesters currently operating in the watershed process manure from around 10,000 cows. The County's goal with this new facility is to **increase processing capacity by 30,000 cows**.
- If you are in favor of this proposal, be sure to [contact your Dane County Board supervisor](#) to voice your support.
- Know that Clean Lakes Alliance will continue to partner with the County to help make this and other lake-improvement actions a reality.

Clean Lakes Alliance is thrilled to see such bold action taken on behalf of our lakes. We applaud Dane County for its ongoing leadership in protecting water quality, and for supporting producers implementing farm practices rooted in sustainability.



Clean Lakes Alliance Executive Director James Tye offers supporting remarks at a Dane County-hosted media event.

Building blocks of success

We take great pride in both the natural scenic beauty of our lakes and the rich cultural heritage represented by our rolling, pastoral landscapes. Dane County agricultural processors annually contribute \$2.5 billion to the local economy. The processing of milk into dairy products accounts for \$416 million of this total, helping to make Wisconsin #1 in the nation for cheese production. At the same time, the lakes have drawn people to their shores for thousands of years, and they continue to do so to this day. Agriculture and water wealth shape our history and identity, and both can and should be able to coexist if we properly care for the landscape that nourishes their health.

Clean Lakes Alliance and its Dane County partners are committed to promoting better soil health as paramount to achieving cleaner water, improved climate resiliency, and more vibrant communities and ecosystems. We also believe this latest budget proposal builds upon a growing list of accomplishments, **including those initiated, led, or co-led by Clean Lakes Alliance over the last decade:**

- Creation of the producer-led watershed group, Yahara Pride Farms
- Development of the *Yahara CLEAN Strategic Action Plan for Phosphorus Reduction*
- Production of the annual *State of the Lakes*
- Awarding >\$1.4 million in Clean Lakes Grants, with 79% of that total funding farmland-conservation causes
- Purchase of low-disturbance manure injection equipment
- Piloting of manure composting and aerial seeding of cover crops
- Planting of vegetated stream buffers to filter farm-field runoff
- Participant & promoter of Dane County's Healthy Farms, Healthy Lakes Task Force
- Launch of the *Renew the Blue* lake-cleanup initiative

Cows and water quality

Did you know the average cow produces 140 pounds of manure each day? That means the Yahara River Watershed's estimated 60,000 cows—representing the greatest concentration of dairy cows in the county—**produce an amount of waste equal to 2.4 million people** (...more than the population of Houston, Texas, the fourth largest city in the U.S.). Unlike human waste, cow manure is typically not treated, but rather spread on fields where it can be vulnerable to runoff.

Land spreading of raw manure, particularly during the winter, is now identified as the biggest source of phosphorus pollution that turns our lakes green and thick with algae. In fact, about half of the annual phosphorus runoff into the Yahara lakes is delivered through Lake Mendota's rural tributaries during the months of January, February, and

March when frozen-ground conditions prevail.

We are grateful that Dane County continues to assist farmers with nutrient management planning and the cost sharing of conservation practices. Thirty years of stream monitoring show that such efforts are working. If not for increased rainfall and runoff during this period, these practices would have resulted in a 36% decrease in the average amount of phosphorus entering the lakes each year.

Successful efforts also include building two of five recommended manure digesters (starting in 2011) that are diverting over 1,600 pounds of phosphorus from the lakes each year. The digesters – accepting waste from roughly 10,000 cows – are also generating renewable natural gas and allowing phosphorus to be exported out of the watershed as marketable compost product. And more recently, prompted by recommendations from the Healthy Farms, Healthy Lakes Task Force, the County has instituted a manure-storage-certification program and expanded coverage of winter-spreading permits.

Now, the County seeks to design, build, and operate a third digester that can process waste from an additional 30,000 cows, **resulting in the treatment of 400 million gallons of manure annually**. The proposed feasibility study will explore where and how to open a facility of this size and capacity, identify options for transporting manure to the facility, and investigate the types of fertilizer products that can be created and distributed to benefit farms of every size.

A Renew the Blue success story

In May, Clean Lakes Alliance hosted a celebratory kickoff of *Renew the Blue*, a lake-cleanup initiative spearheaded by the broadest and most diverse coalition of organizations ever assembled to improve our local lakes. To quote from the stakeholder guide: *“Clean and healthy lakes are a benchmark of a healthy community. We are proud of our prior work and investments to protect and enhance these assets, but more needs to be done for the lakes to meet their potential.”*

The County Executive’s commitment to investing in additional manure-processing capacity **targets today’s biggest root cause of excessive algal growth in the Yahara lakes**. If brought to fruition, the proposed facility would create a one-stop service for farmers’ manure, helping to transport it to one central location while giving both large and small farms an opportunity to access the needed technology to treat it.

In addition to the feasibility study, the County Executive’s budget includes \$10 million for the Dane County Conservation Fund to help with land acquisitions to improve water quality. It also includes \$5 million for continued dredging on Door Creek and the Yahara chain of lakes, furthering the larger “Suck the Muck” goal of removing legacy phosphorus while maximizing flood drainage. Taken together, these investments and actions are adding up to meaningful change, propelling us toward a not-so-distant future when cleaner lakes reflect our community values.

“We have done a lot over the past decade to address the root cause of excessive algae growth in the Yahara Chain of Lakes. Yet, as our community has stepped up phosphorus reduction and containment efforts, climate change rains have become even more frequent. We need a grander scale solution to address this challenge if we want to reach our phosphorus runoff reduction goals. I believe Dane County can and should play a leading a role in this work.”

--Joe Parisi, Dane County Executive

Our pledge and how to help

We need your help now more than ever. Our strength and influence depend entirely on your volunteerism, donations, event participation, advocacy, and personal actions. The strength of any alliance is determined by the cumulative impact of many individuals and groups, and it’s that support that translates into real gains for our lakes and surrounding communities.

[DONATE](#)

[TELL YOUR COUNTY SUPERVISOR HOW YOU FEEL](#)

Clean Lakes Alliance remains committed to being a positive, influential voice for our lakes. We will continue strengthening the partnerships behind the Alliance while advocating on your behalf—sometimes quietly and behind the scenes—for the needed investments and actions that will yield the biggest impacts. We also pledge to continue bringing transparency to our collective progress, especially as the *Renew the Blue* initiative transitions from planning to full-scale implementation.

Thank you for the role you play in our growing Alliance. We look forward to counting on your support as we work with Dane County and our many other partners in creating a better water quality future.

In Partnership,

James