OUR VIEWS

Water supply must be protected

MANY COMMUNITIES are learning about the importance of water this summer.

In Decatur and Mount Zion, this summer's drought has led to water restrictions and a concern that Lake Decatur and other supplemental sources might not be able to provide water to important industrial users. The situation isn't as dire in other communities, but the drought has put a focus on water.

This summer illustrates the importance of preserving a viable water supply, which makes efforts to protect the Mahomet Aquifer even more vital.

Area Disposal, a subsidiary of Peoria Disposal Co., wants permission to store waste from polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCBs, at Clinton Landfill. The landfill, however, sits directly over the aquifer, which supplies water to communities in 15 Central Illinois counties, including DeWitt, McLean and Macon. PCBs have been found to create long-term environmental and health problems if allowed to leak into water supplies.

The Environmental Protection Agency has delayed the permit approval process to allow for more hydrogeological testing. That process is expected to take several months.

But there also is legislation that would add another layer to the process. Republican state Reps. Bill Mitchell, Forsyth, and Dan Brady, Bloomington, are sponsoring legislation that would require permit approval by every community that sits above the aquifer. If passed, the legislation would likely make the storage of PCBs at the Clinton Landfill impossible.

Chris Coulter, vice president of Area Disposal, said his company will handle the chemical carefully. "We aren't going to jeopardize the health of the community for a profit." Coulter is correct that no one wants a landfill in his backyard, but that waste generated by communities has to be handled in some way.

Both Ryan McCrady, Decatur city manager, and Sally Heffernan, assistant to the Normal city manager, spoke against the storage of PCBs at the site. Both cited that while the aquifer is not their only source of water, it's an important supplemental or alternative to current water supplies.

Landfills, and the storage of chemical waste, are a necessary evil. No one wants a landfill or a chemical storage facility in their neighborhood. But this issue is more far-reaching than a NIMBY (Not In My Backyard).

Storing PCBs on top of such a vast and important water supply isn't worth the risk.

We're confident that Area Disposal would do everything in their power to make sure the chemicals were handled safely. But there's always that chance something will go wrong, and if that happens, the results would be devastating.

The bill being sponsored by Brady and Mitchell — HB 6153 — remains in committee. The legislation is necessary to protect the area's future water supply.