

# Strategic Plan 2013-2017



1902 Fox Drive, Suite G  
Champaign, IL 61821

217.344.2371

[prairierivers.org](http://prairierivers.org)

# Prairie Rivers Network

## Strategic Plan 2013-2017

Prairie Rivers Network is a not-for-profit, Illinois-based conservation organization that promotes the long-term health of Illinois waterways. This strategic plan sets forth who we are and how we operate, our policy stances and current program areas, and our strategies to improve and expand, particularly over the next five years. It is intended both for internal use by staff, directors, and PRN members and also to inform others about our goals and ways of working.

### OUR HISTORY

Prairie Rivers Network came together in 1967 as a successful citizen initiative to halt an unwise reservoir project in central Illinois. Since that beginning the organization has responded to changing conservation needs and opportunities to become one of the largest, most effective conservation groups in the state. Efforts in the 1970s largely focused on reforming or halting new reservoirs and channelization projects. In ensuing years, the group's organizing and advocacy efforts were put to use challenging questionable landfills and promoting resource-use efficiency. In the late 1990s, the organization responded to problems of waterway degradation by changing its name, refining its focus, and adding programs to protect drinking water and wildlife habitat and to promote the long-term vigor of riverside communities. This new focus, along with a new affiliation with the National Wildlife Federation, initiated a still-continuing period of strong, sustained growth, success made possible by generous members, far-sighted foundations, and the work of skilled professional staff and countless volunteers.

### OUR MISSION

Prairie Rivers Network champions clean, healthy rivers and lakes and safe drinking water to benefit the people and wildlife of Illinois. Drawing upon sound science and working cooperatively with others we advocate public policies and cultural values that sustain the ecological health and biological diversity of water resources and aquatic ecosystems.

### GOAL FOR ILLINOIS WATERWAYS

Our work is guided by a vision of healthy "waterways," a term that, for us, includes not only water flows and aquatic life but lands adjacent to or otherwise closely connected with rivers, streams, lakes, and other water bodies. Waterways supply valuable resources for people and essential habitat for other animals and plants. Our vision of healthy waterways—our vision of good waterway use—comprises the following elements:

### CLEAN WATER

Water quality in all waterways should safely protect the many good ways people use them.

## HEALTHY WATER FLOWS

Waterways should be free of any human alterations of natural flow regimes that noticeably worsen flooding and droughts, that unnecessarily disrupt biological communities or that interfere with the ability of waterways to meet present and future drinking water needs.

## EDIBLE FISH

Waterways should support a wide range of commercial and sport fish that reproduce naturally and that everyone can safely eat.

## RESILIENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Waterways should provide appropriately connected habitats for all native species, aquatic and terrestrial, thereby facilitating adaptation to changing climates.

## PROTECTING THE BEST

The state's least-disturbed stream segments should enjoy enhanced legal protection to aid long-term scientific study and for everyone to enjoy.

## RARE SPECIES

Rare species in and around waterways should receive protection that achieves the goals of endangered species statutes and other protective laws and programs.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Underlying our goal and activities are the following principles:

### NATURE'S CONNECTIVITY

The natural world forms an interconnected whole of which we are a part. Our long-term welfare depends on the sustained health of this natural community.

### COMMON OWNERSHIP AS TRUSTEES

Waters and wildlife belong collectively to all citizens, present and future. People living today carry stewardship obligations, and public entities should consistently act as water and wildlife trustees.

## NATURE AS MEASURE

In using and enjoying nature we are wise to admit the limits on human powers and understanding; wise to recognize and draw upon nature's embedded wisdom; wise to respect, by cautious action, the inherent fitness of the ways nature has evolved in its functioning and composition.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

All people who alter waterways, directly or indirectly, should accept responsibility for their actions and bear the burden of ensuring that their actions cause no degradation.

## PROPERTY RIGHTS AND THE COMMON GOOD

Consistent with longstanding legal principles, owners of private property should have no right to use what they own in ways that harm other people, that degrade ecological health or that diminish renewable resources for future users.

## MAJOR PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

The waterways of Illinois water suffer degradation of five basic types, each with multiple causes:

- ***Sedimentation*** comes from soil erosion, from land uses and drainage practices that alter water flows, and from structures and other channel modifications that disturb river features and separate rivers from their natural floodplains.
- ***Chemical and thermal changes in water flows*** stem from discrete pollution sources (e.g., discharge pipes, ditches) and from land uses that generate polluted run-off (including mining and fracking, waste storage, and applications of fertilizer, pesticides, and manure), degrading both surface and groundwater. These problems worsen when physical changes to waterways (including the loss of wetlands and riparian vegetation) reduce a river's cleansing powers.
- ***Flow regimes*** are disrupted by deliberate diversions and interferences (e.g., withdrawals, reservoir management) and by unintentional ones (e.g., thermal discharges that increase evaporation). Groundwater withdrawals lower water tables, draining rivers and streams via recharge pathways. Levees exacerbate floods and droughts by separating big rivers from their floodplains and wetlands, while drainage ditching has similar effects on headwater streams.
- ***Invasive and irruptive species***—both intentionally introduced and accidental migrants—often appear due to human activities (e.g., waterway alterations and boating); they more readily become pests when inter-species competition is disrupted by physical, chemical, and biological degradation.

- ***Habitat fragmentation and loss*** comes about through many of the above-mentioned actions, including physical structures in and along waterways, sedimentation, vegetation removal and tillage, floodplain development, and the erosive effects of accelerated water flows. Underlying these specific human activities are cultural values, perceptions of nature, political attitudes, economic forces, and character traits that drive and shape human behavior and that are, ultimately, the root causes of ecological decline.

## OUR CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

Prairie Rivers Network's specific conservation programs are intended above all to change public policies related to waterways and to enhance the enforcement of sound policies, thereby achieving lasting benefits on a large scale. We act ethically, make use of the best science and economic studies, work cooperatively with other organizations, and are willing to talk with all interested parties to find solutions. We promote research, local activism, public education, and land acquisition when and to the extent it aids our efforts to improve public policies. As explained below, we work with many partners—governments, other not-for-profit organizations, businesses, and individual citizens—often at the same time.

## ILLINOIS FOCUS

Our interest, now and for the foreseeable future, is in the waterways of Illinois, including those along state borders and the Great Lakes. This interest extends to degradation occurring outside the state that affects Illinois waterways and to activities in Illinois that disturb waterways elsewhere. We are particularly interested in improving programs and policies that can also help conservation in other states.

## DEALINGS WITH GOVERNMENT

Much of our work involves pushing local, state, and federal government entities to do more to achieve our overall goal. We press for better law enforcement and enhanced research, data collection, and monitoring. We call for better legislation and for stronger regulations more consistent with existing and new legislative goals. And we help agencies and other governmental bodies gain adequate funding. While we work collaboratively with government, we sometimes find it necessary to press government bodies vigorously to fulfill their responsibilities and to protect and enhance waterways more effectively.

## LINKS WITH OTHER CONSERVATION GROUPS

PRN is the independent Illinois affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation and benefits from a strong and close relationship, working to achieve shared goals. PRN regularly works also in tandem with other conservation organizations when goals overlap and joint action seems productive. Our most regular partners are the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club, the Environmental Law and Policy Center, the Illinois Environmental Council, the Illinois Stewardship Alliance, and the Heartland Coalfield Alliance. Through the NWF we have recurring interactions with other state affiliates, particularly in adjacent states. We also benefit greatly by the support and guidance of foundations that fund our work and help link us to organizations with similar programs. Further, PRN often seeks allies from outside the conservation community when pushing for legislative, regulatory, and other program

changes, including government entities, trade organizations, private businesses, and a wide variety of not-for-profit entities. PRN is non-partisan and stands ready to work with and to support public office holders without regard for political party when and as they share our policy stances. A goal for the planning period is to expand the type and number of organizations with which we work.

## LINKS WITH THE PUBLIC

PRN works to enhance public awareness and public connection to waterways when such education efforts are likely to help achieve specific policy changes. Similarly, we assist local citizens in protecting and enhancing local waterways when local conflicts, successfully resolved, could stimulate policy changes of broad application. As our work has shown, local citizens greatly help our efforts by alerting us to problems, supplying vital information, and assisting in advocacy efforts with government officials. In public dealings we seek also to encourage support for PRN and other organizations involved in waterway conservation.

## FEDERAL LAWS AND POLICIES

PRN typically works to improve federal policies related to our overall goal by assisting NWF and participating in national and collaborative reform efforts. We interact regularly with the U.S. E.P.A., the Corps of Engineers, and NRCS, and occasionally with other federal entities on issues related directly to Illinois waterways, including federal oversight of the activities of state and local governments in Illinois.

## LOBBYING AND LITIGATION

Given our primary focus on pushing for policy change and insisting on full law enforcement, we engage in legislative lobbying to the extent consistent with our charitable status and engage also in litigation when unable to achieve reasonable results through other means. Litigation is undertaken by staff attorneys working in conjunction with legal counsel supplied by other organizations.

## PROGRAM AREAS AND INTERESTS

Our conservation work aims to achieve our overall goal, using the just-described modes of operation and addressing the listed major problems and challenges. We plan to continue and expand this work over the next five years. Given the widespread causes of waterway degradation and limited resources, PRN necessarily focuses its efforts on those specific areas most likely to yield conservation benefits and to effect lasting policy change. Our current program activities and those that we desire to begin or to expand in coming years, fall in the following categories:

### WATER QUALITY

For years PRN has pressed the state of Illinois to improve its enforcement of water-quality laws, particularly the federal Clean Water Act, and it will continue to do so. We review individual pollution permits and press for improvements, leading to changes in permit-writing practices. We push for enhanced monitoring and law

enforcement. We identify specific areas in which water-quality standards and designated water uses can and should be strengthened and work with other conservation groups to bring about regulatory change. We have begun, and hope to expand, a program specifically aimed at water pollution generated by coal mining and coal ash disposal, seeking to enhance enforcement and to tighten applicable standards.

In coming years we plan:

- (i) to press for stronger stormwater discharge controls (covering all discharges, including agricultural and mining);
- (ii) to enhance implementation and enforcement of discharge permits and requirements to obtain permits;
- (iii) to strengthen implementation and enforcement of the state's anti-degradation policy;
- (iv) to enhance and strengthen protected uses of Chicago area waterways;
- (v) to improve application of the Clean Water Act and the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act to mining and ash-disposal activities; and
- (vi) to press for greater controls on energy production activities, including thermal discharges; in addition to the water-quality actions mentioned in following paragraphs.

## AGRICULTURE-RELATED PROBLEMS

With a sizeable majority of all Illinois lands devoted to agriculture, mostly to annual row crops, agriculture not surprisingly is the leading industrial cause of waterway degradation, due to polluted run-off (fertilizers, pesticides, animal wastes) and to a wide range of vegetation-removal, drainage, tillage, and water-flow alteration practices. PRN's long-term hope is to address many of these sources of degradation (and to enhance awareness of them), in the process holding agriculture responsible for its harms to the same extent as other polluters.

In coming years we plan, in various ways, to push for the following legal and policy changes:

- (i) regulatory programs to reduce polluted run-off;
- (ii) the adoption and enforcement of numeric or other water-quality standards for primary fertilizer elements (nitrogen and phosphorus);
- (iii) enhanced enforcement of permitting procedures for livestock facilities; and

- (iv) more stringent regulations for livestock operations to protect public and environmental health.

We also plan:

- (v) to study and promote—leading to legislative change—more responsible drainage management, thereby reducing unnecessary harms caused by vegetation removal, dredging, waterway alterations, subsurface drain outfalls, and distorted water flows.

## WILDLIFE HABITAT, WETLANDS, AND STREAMSIDE VEGETATION

A longstanding goal of PRN has been to reach beyond water flows to address alterations of surrounding lands that cause waterway degradation. PRN challenges selected, unwise federal permits (issued under section 404 of the Clean Water Act) that authorize the deposit of dredge and fill material into wetlands.

Looking ahead, we plan:

- (i) to increase our monitoring of federal actions under section 404, seeking to identify and remedy chronic problems; and
- (ii) to press the state to impose its own mitigation provisions on such permits (under section 401 of the Clean Water Act) so that degradation is offset and so that mitigation obligations are enforceable and enforced.

In the past year PRN has worked with state and regional governmental entities, land trusts, and other conservation groups to help coordinate land conservation work so that it more directly supports the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan. This coordination work, though essential, provides only a small step in addressing the major loss of wildlife habitat, in Illinois generally and along state waterways in particular.

In this program area PRN plans:

- (iii) to continue working to coordinate land-conservation measures to achieve greater landscape benefits;
- (iv) to find new ways to promote changes in public policies, at the state or local level, that will better protect and promote restoration of wetland and waterway habitats; and
- (v) to promote a state vision for the long-term restoration of the largest rivers (particularly the Mississippi and Illinois). PRN hopes in future years to expand greatly its program activities in this area.



## WATERWAY OBSTRUCTIONS AND ALTERATIONS

The timing of water flows in Illinois waterways has been significantly altered, with widespread ecological effects, due to structural alterations (dams, levees, berms) in the waterways, including the construction of canals and other artificial water conduits. Best known are the locks and dams on the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers and the Chicago-area waterway alterations, which reversed the flow of the Chicago River and have led to widespread, costly invasions of species between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi basin.

In coming years, Prairie Rivers Network plans to:

- (i) continue pushing to separate these basins, ending direct water flows between them;
- (ii) working with conservation partners to press the Corps of Engineers to implement sensible management and restoration programs;
- (iii) resist efforts to deepen or widen ship channels;
- (iv) force users of locks to pay more of the associated costs of operation, maintenance, and ecological restoration; and
- (v) protect and restore free-flowing rivers. These efforts are, PRN hopes, only early, modest steps in a long-term campaign to reconsider the engineering of waterways, to reconnect rivers to their natural floodplains, and to reduce reliance on artificial structures that control (and often exacerbate) flooding.

## WATER WITHDRAWALS AND PUBLIC ACCESS

Illinois water law is woefully inadequate to deal with looming shortages of both surface water and groundwater. The problems are closely linked, in that groundwater withdrawals often draw water from river beds, exacerbating problems of low-water flows. PRN has recently begun a multi-year project to press for incremental revisions in Illinois water law. Drought conditions in the state are likely to lead to greater groundwater pumping and to increased interest in agricultural irrigation, even as they lead directly to lower water flows and thus increased pollution concentrations and greater harm to aquatic wildlife. It is essential that Illinois embrace water laws that protect the ecological health of waterways, stimulating water-saving practices throughout the state.

Prairie Rivers Network plans to press for policy changes in existing law and regulations that would:

- (i) limit water withdrawals that cause undue ecological harm;
- (ii) enhance the ability of all water uses and stakeholders (including local governments, water providers, and public waterways users) to challenge unreasonable water uses;

- (iii) expand mandatory reporting of water withdrawals and public access to the information; and
- (iv) recognize and protect the hydrological connections of groundwater and surface water. Along with this work PRN also hopes to gain clear recognition and protection of the public's longstanding legal right of access to all waterways that are navigable in fact. The success of these efforts will depend initially on PRN's ability to gain adequate funding specifically for it.

## PROTECTING HIGHEST QUALITY STREAMS

Few Illinois streams retain more than 75% of their native aquatic species, and nearly all suffer from pollution, flow alterations, and loss of key vegetation. For many important reasons, the state should impose special protections on the remaining, high-quality streams, both as wildlife refuges and as places for scientists to study the functioning and composition of relatively unaltered waterways. PRN plans to expand its initial efforts to push the state to use existing Clean Water Act provisions (outstanding resources waters provisions) to enhance protections for key waterways.

## MODES OF ORGANIZATIONAL OPERATION

Prairie Rivers Network operates in the following way:

### PROFESSIONAL STAFF

PRN's conservation work is undertaken chiefly by its professional staff, necessarily so given the scientific, legal, and political complexity of its conservation work. Volunteers are enlisted to assist in these efforts under close staff guidance. PRN strives to provide an attractive long-term employment setting for its staff, with an accommodating work environment, competitive compensation, and opportunities for professional advancement.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Providing oversight and responsible for hiring the Executive Director is a volunteer Board of Directors, which operates in accordance with by-laws. Although board members have direct dealings with staff members, the staff reports solely to the Executive Director. Further, individual board members who assist in conservation work as volunteers, or who have occasion to speak on behalf of PRN, do so under the guidance of the Executive Director. A particular challenge for PRN (and similar organizations) is to recruit and retain qualified board members. The problem is particularly acute given the complexity of PRN's program activities and the need for board members who can offer overall guidance and help set priorities and develop strategies. In order to retain experience and expertise, the PRN board does not enforce strict term limits; a few board members have served for more than 10 years. PRN strives to develop racial and gender diversity on its board, but has had limited success, due again to the complexity of the issues and the need to recruit board members chiefly from volunteers with demonstrated personal commitments to conservation.

Looking ahead, PRN plans to:

- (i) expand the size of its board;
- (ii) add board members with particular skills that can assist in overseeing a growing and increasingly complex organization, leaving staff members with greater time to devote to direct conservation work; and
- (iii) increase board diversity and achieve better state-wide representation.

## MEMBERSHIP AND ADVANCEMENT

For years PRN pursued a growth plan that relied chiefly on increased donations from a relatively small donor base, on increased grants from foundations, and on a track record of high-quality work performed with relatively modest administrative costs and low fundraising expenses. Following that model, the organization grew in its operations by more than 250% over a ten-year period. Most donations have come from residents of or near Champaign County, with consistent, strong giving by members of the board of directors. Looking forward, PRN plans to:

- (i) establish a strong local presence in at least one location elsewhere in the state;
- (ii) continue promoting the organization through social media, and as an adjunct to program activities around the state, as a further means of building membership;
- (iii) expand efforts to increase donations; and
- (iv) reconsider the format of the annual PRN banquet.

PRN hopes that these and related efforts will lead within the next five years to at least 1000 members and at least 50 members who, by joining the Bruce Hannon Friends of Illinois Rivers, pledge annual contributions of at least \$1000.

## MEASURING ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND RECONSIDERING PROGRAMS

Guided by the Executive Director and working initially through its Conservation Committee the Board of Directors annually reviews all program activities, comparing achievements with initial goals and compiling conclusions in annual program summaries. These reviews are used to reconsider goals, sharpen programs, reassess resource commitments, and identify options for new initiatives.