

# Prairie River Notes

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The Illinois Affiliate of National Wildlife Federation

Summer 2005

## Drainage in Illinois:

### Time for a New Approach



Spoon River April 2003

Before reading any further, briefly consider the differences between these two photos taken from the exact same viewing point on the Spoon River. What you might not know is that what happened on the Spoon this past April could also happen on a river near you.

Illinois' thousands of miles of rivers and streams wind through forests, urban areas, high limestone bluffs and lowlands. For many, home and community are defined by the rivers they live on or near; rivers they fish or paddle; and rivers where they go to watch birds and other wildlife that make their home along their banks.

Rivers and streams have also played an integral part in shaping Illinois' agricultural economy. For the first settlers, they offered a form of natural drainage for lands that were often inundated with water. Later, as human-built agricultural drainage systems were put into place, rivers and streams were enlarged, deepened and straightened to achieve the goal of quick, high capacity field drainage.

In the late 1800's, when agricultural drainage systems were first built, however, there was no expectation or requirement to consider how stream channelization might impact riparian ecosystems. Like many other industries, however, agriculture has undergone tremendous changes in knowledge, technology and practice. Changes have, at times, resulted from the fact that those practices degraded or harmed natural ecosystems. For example, the invention of tillage equipment that turns over a smaller amount of soil, and an increased popularity in "no till" practices, have reduced soil erosion and its resulting environmental impacts. Buffer strips have been promoted along agricultural fields to trap sediment, fertilizers, pesticides, and bacterial pathogens that would otherwise enter the rivers and streams adjacent to fields.

Today, almost 2000 drainage districts in Illinois continue to dredge, channelize, and clear cut along Illinois' rivers. Like the problems caused by tilling and runoff, the negative environmental effects of agricultural stream channelization on river ecosystems have been recognized by state agencies, county soil and water conservation districts, and other experts. In 2001, the Department of Natural Resources issued a report entitled "Critical Trends in Illinois Ecosystems." With respect to the conditions of the state's rivers, the report concluded that most Illinois streams had only fair to poor habitat quality and species diversity. Those river basins that ranked the worst in habitat typically were basins where: 1) agriculture was the predominant land use;

*(Continued on page 4)*



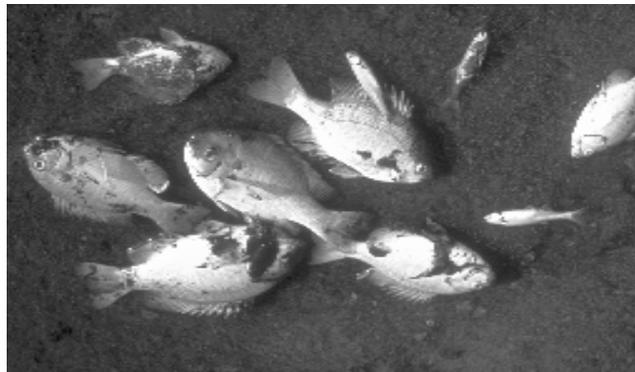
Spoon River April 2005

## Tell Pollution Control Board that Fish Need Oxygen

The debate over oxygen requirements in streams continues, and your involvement is still critical. The Fall 2004 edition of *Prairie Rivers Notes* explained in detail the proposal submitted by the Illinois Association of Wastewater Agencies (IAWA) to weaken regulations that require dissolved oxygen in streams. If adopted, Illinois oxygen rules would be the weakest in the country during the most critical times of the year and could impair growth and survival of fish and other stream life.

Experts, state agencies, and interested parties have continued to discuss the problems with the proposal and are in the process of identifying an appropriate, protective alternative. However, polluters are continuing to pressure the state to adopt rules that would not protect all the fish and wildlife in Illinois' streams. The Illinois Pollution Control Board (IPCB) will be holding its third public hearing on the proposed rule on August 25. Please write letters to the IPCB and/or plan to speak at the hearing to ask the IPCB to

maintain strong protections for streams and fish by rejecting any proposal to weaken Illinois' dissolved oxygen requirements.



Without oxygen, fish can suffocate

Letters to the Illinois Pollution Control Board should be sent to the IPCB, P.O. Box 19374, Springfield, IL 62794-9274.

## New Phosphorus Regulations Almost Final



Too much phosphorus causes algae blooms

In Spring 2004, Illinois EPA proposed a new rule that would require substantial reduction of phosphorus in the discharge from new and expanding wastewater and industrial facilities. Excessive phosphorus discharges create favorable conditions for algae blooms and aquatic plants. These plants and decaying organic matter choke out oxygen in the water and smother aquatic life. Reducing phosphorus pollution protects water quality and species that live in our rivers and streams. *Prairie Rivers* presented technical testimony to the Illinois Pollution Control Board (IPCB), and several members and other organizations submitted comments in support of the rule.

If this rule is adopted, it will be the most significant regulation available to reduce phosphorus pollution in Illinois' streams. In April, the IPCB issued an order stating that the proposed rule is reasonable and made only minor changes to the proposal. This ruling was very good news, but the proposed regulations are not final, yet. The IPCB is now accepting any additional comments, and then the rule must be approved by a committee of legislators before it can take effect.

## Teaming Up For Cleaning-up

Rain clouds loomed overhead on a dirt road next to the Vermilion River. Nearby, four petite and determined teenage girls were grunting, laughing and cheering as they pried a tractor tire out of a pool of water and rolled it up a steep bank. After propping the enormous tire against a maple tree, they gave each other a proud high-five.

This was one of the many inspirational sites at the Vermilion River Cleanup this past Earth Day (April 22<sup>nd</sup>). Despite high water levels from spring rains, the cleanup was a HUGE success for a group of Vermilion county citizens who planned and implemented their first cleanup in only a matter of months. As a result of their hard work, over 150 students, teachers, and other volunteers from the Danville area gathered to help remove trash and debris from the riverbanks.

Over four dump truck loads of garbage were removed from the cleanup site at Anderson Hill and over three dump truck loads from Ellsworth Park. Both sections of the river are common put-in and take-out sites for paddlers and fishermen who will now be able to enjoy the trash free riverbanks. Among the things removed were the usual and unusual culprits that we too often see in our rivers: refrigerators, kitchen cabinets, metal barrels, bed frames, soda and water bottles, food wrappers and tires.

The clean-up was not only a day for students, teachers, and other adults to work side by side; it was a day of outdoor education as well. Bob Szafoni from the



Illinois Department of Natural Resources and Prairie River's staff member Kim Erndt worked with students, teaching them about the river, spring wildflowers, and the other interesting inhabitants found in the ecosystem. At the end of the cleanup, everyone gathered for a picnic at Ellsworth Park which allowed for ample bragging time.

Our hats off to everyone who worked so hard to make this cleanup a success: Middlefork Canoe Outfitters, the City of Danville, Leadership Danville, Oakwood High School, Catlin High School, Georgetown High School, Rossville High School, Lincoln's Challenge, Bob Szafoni, and Keep Vermilion County Beautiful. Special thanks go to the City of Danville who picked up every scrap of debris placed on the roadside by the volunteers.



If you are interested in participating in a river cleanup, "Illinois, It's Our River Day" is September 17<sup>th</sup>! Groups on the Sangamon and the Vermilion Rivers will be holding cleanups on this date, as will other groups around the state. Then on October 9<sup>th</sup> be sure to come out and help us with the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Salt Fork River Cleanup!

For more information about this and other volunteer events around the state, please keep an eye on our River Happenings Calendar located on our web site at [www.prairierivers.org](http://www.prairierivers.org).

## The Illinois Stream Team Continues to Grow



To learn more about Illinois Stream Team, visit our website at [www.prairierivers.org](http://www.prairierivers.org). To join the Stream Team, e-mail us at [info@prairierivers.org](mailto:info@prairierivers.org).

In April, ten new recruits joined us in Pontiac, Illinois, at the second training for Illinois Stream Team, Prairie Rivers Network's volunteer water quality monitoring program. Similar to the first course held in September 2004, trainees enjoyed a full day workshop that included discussions of goals for volunteer monitoring, instruction on designing a sampling plan, and demonstration of and hands on experience conducting water quality monitoring tests. At the end of the day, participants left with the experience and equipment necessary to test waters for dissolved oxygen, pH, temperature, orthophosphate, nitrate, alkalinity, turbidity, and flow.

We now have 12 groups monitoring their streams, and our goal is to have a Stream Team in every watershed. Our thanks to the Lumpkin Family Foundation, Decatur Audubon Society, and Lt. Governor Pat Quinn's office whose grants have made the growth and development of this program possible.

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## Drainage

*Continued from front page*

2) streams had been channelized; and 3) streams lacked natural habitat features such as wooded riparian corridors.

A 1997 University of Illinois Extension report entitled 60 Ways Farmers Can Protect Surface Water summed up the problem when it said "Channelization seemed like a good idea at the time," but "channelization often makes things worse in the long run," and is "an idea whose time has gone." The report recommends letting streams follow their normal path.

Yet, unlike changes in tilling practices and the development of buffer strip, few steps have been taken to promote and implement newer drainage practices to minimize disturbance of riparian ecosystems. Instead, traditional practices largely remain the norm and rivers are routinely stripped of their vegetation and channelized, causing habitat loss for fish and wildlife. The pictures on page 1 were taken at the exact same spot on the Spoon River in Champaign County and vividly illustrate the dramatic impacts that drainage maintenance activities performed in April of this year have had on the river.

In a state where 70% of the land is used for growing crops, adequate drainage is essential for crop success and for the health of the state's agricultural economy. However, equally important is ensuring that the other economic and environmental benefits of those rivers and streams that co-exist with agricultural lands are not lost.

Prairie Rivers believes it's time for a new approach to drainage maintenance that balances all river functions and protects the environment as the drainage code requires. To that end, and with the support of the Lumpkin Family Foundation, we have written "A Citizen's Guide to Illinois' Agricultural Drainage Practices and Law" for individuals who want to learn more about the practices, policies, and law regarding agricultural drainage in Illinois and ensure that providing adequate drainage is not done at the expensive of maintaining river ecosystem health. For more information or a copy of this guide, visit [www.prairierivers.org](http://www.prairierivers.org). With your interest and support, we can achieve a new environmentally sensitive approach to drainage in Illinois.

## Staff Changes at Prairie Rivers

After three years, Prairie Rivers' watershed scientist Beth Wentzel is moving north to Madison, Wisconsin. Beth has been a tireless advocate for the rivers and water quality of Illinois, as well as an avid smallmouth fisherwoman. While we will miss her, she will continue her work for rivers and fish from her new location, and we look forward to working with her.

Taking over here at Prairie Rivers are two new scientists. Glynnis Collins has a BA in Environmental and Forest Biology and an MS in Biology. She is well versed in the Clean Water Act and permitting issues, having worked for many years at the San Francisco

Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, dealing with 404, 401, and NPDES permits and TMDLs. She also has experience in watershed-based ambient water quality monitoring and has done research into the fate and transport of nitrogen in water. She has worked with permit applicants, advocacy groups, municipalities, and local citizens—all of whom we communicate with in our clean water work on a regular basis.

Traci Barkley is a former Prairie Rivers volunteer with both an MS and a BS in the biological sciences. She has worked for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency where she was involved in water quality monitoring for the 305(b) report; provided technical assistance to the public, local watershed groups, and state agencies; prepared the Lake Michigan Water Quality report; and was involved in statewide discussions related to water quality standards and criteria, NPDES permits, and TMDL development. She also coordinated River Watch volunteers for the Illinois EcoWatch program, giving her good experience for leading our new Illinois Stream Team program.

We are very excited to have Glynnis and Traci join our staff and encourage you to give them a call whenever you have any questions about water quality issues in your community.



Glynnis Collins and Traci Barkley



On Saturday, May 21, Champaign Surplus was the site of a Prairie Rivers "members only" sale sponsored by store owners Ira and Lynn Wachtel. In addition to offering special deals for our members, Champaign Surplus joined with Patagonia to donate \$750 to support the work of our AmeriCorps volunteer coordinator Jane Li. Jane has been working at Prairie Rivers since last fall helping plan volunteer events to get people out on their rivers. Some of her activities include storm drain stenciling, construction site stormwater enforcement training, maintaining the calendar of events, and writing the monthly *Volunteer E-newsletter*.

Our thanks to both Champaign Surplus and Patagonia for their generous support and to Jane for all her hard work.



Prairie Rivers' Board Members with the Wachtels

## Scully Challenge Grant

Our \$5,000 Challenge Grant is off to a good start thanks to the generosity of the following members:

Rachel Fowler	William Kubitz
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Frank	Joe Laszlo and Holly Love
Ned and Lizie Goldwasser	Amy Pavlik
Craig Holderness	Yvette Scheven
Harold and Pat Jensen	Mary Kay Solecki and John Taft
Elizabeth Johnson	Nancy Stagg

Don't forget, if you make a donation of \$100 or more for the first time, it will be matched dollar-for-dollar by donor Michael Scully. To date, donations towards the challenge grant exceed \$1,300.

## Report Pollution!

You can protect Illinois rivers by reporting water pollution. With a grant from ~~Montgomery~~ Prairie Rivers has developed a new sticker to help citizens identify signs of water pollution in their local rivers and streams. The sticker can be placed on your boat, cooler, or tackle box, so it's readily available. Phone numbers for reporting pollution are also listed. When you renew your membership with Prairie Rivers, we will send you our new sticker free! Working together, we can protect Illinois' rivers and help stop pollution.



## Prairie Rivers Network

*Protecting Illinois' Streams*

*...strives to protect the rivers and streams of Illinois and to promote the lasting health and beauty of watershed communities. By providing information, sound science, and hands-on assistance, Prairie Rivers helps individuals and community groups become effective river conservation leaders.*

### Board of Directors

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Jane Li—AmeriCorps Volunteer Coordinator
Olivia Dorothy—Support Staff
Maggie Bruns—Support Staff
Natalie Galatzer—Stream Team Coordinator

# Join Prairie Rivers Network!

## Or Renew Your Membership!

### Protect Illinois' Rivers and Streams:

Join Prairie Rivers Network — Illinois' statewide organization dedicated to water issues. Your donation will help fund our efforts to bring science and technical information to bear on issues affecting all of our state's waters. You will add strength to our campaign to restore and protect Illinois' rivers and streams for people, fish, and wildlife.



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Cathy Brodsky  
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Caroline Wade  
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Yes, I want to help protect our rivers and streams.

\$15 Student Membership     \$25 Basic Membership  
 \$500     \$250     \$100     \$50  
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E-mail (to receive Action Alerts) \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for your support!*

**Make checks payable to:**  
**Prairie Rivers Network**  
809 S. Fifth Street  
Champaign, Illinois 61820

*All who join **Prairie Rivers** will receive our newsletter and action alerts. Your contribution to Prairie Rivers is tax deductible.*

### Welcome New Members!

Prairie Rivers is very pleased to welcome the following new members who supported us for the first time in 2005. We thank them and ALL of our members for their support of our work to protect Illinois rivers.

**Wanted:** More members dedicated to Prairie Rivers! After you are done reading this newsletter, please pass it on to someone else who loves the outdoors. Share the news about Prairie Rivers Network, and the work we are doing to help communities around the state protect their rivers.

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*Protecting Illinois' Streams*  
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Champaign, Illinois 61820  
217-344-2371  
[www.prairierivers.org](http://www.prairierivers.org)

## Mark Your Calendar!

### **It's Our River Day**

Sangamon River Clean-up  
Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> Monticello/Mahomet  
Contact: Kim Erndt, [kerndt@prairierivers.org](mailto:kerndt@prairierivers.org)

### **Vermilion River Paddling Festival**

Paddling and River Clean-up  
Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> Danville  
Contact: Judy Sacotnik  
[sacotnik@insightbb.com](mailto:sacotnik@insightbb.com)

### **Rivers Curriculum for Teachers Training**

Hosted by Friends of the Chicago River and Others  
Chicago, IL  
July 11<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup>  
Contact: Joni Marin, Friends of the Chicago River  
[friends@chicagoriver.org](mailto:friends@chicagoriver.org)

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Prairie Rivers Network is a member of Earth Share of Illinois. If you participate in a workplace giving campaign, look for ESI and you can designate Prairie Rivers Network to receive your contributions.



**Earth Share**  
OF ILLINOIS