



Most Endangered Rivers

Upper Mississippi Joins Middle Fork on List

By Kim Knowles

For the second year in a row, one of Illinois' rivers is being designated "Most Endangered." This year, the Upper Mississippi, specifically the stretch from Burlington, Iowa to Grafton, Illinois, is receiving this annually bestowed "honor" due to a particularly troubling conflict that is placing the health of the river and the safety of certain communities at great risk.

Unlawful Levee Heights

The conflict concerns illegal activity by a number of agricultural and levee districts that have acted outside the law by raising the heights of their levees without the required governmental approvals. Government oversight and permitting is particularly important in these cases because raising levees often increases the risk that other communities will be flooded. Raising levees can also destroy important floodplain habitats.

In the

Upper Mississippi River, 80 miles of levees between Muscatine, Iowa, and Hamburg, Illinois have been illegally raised, perpetuating a century of habitat degradation and putting less fortunate communities that cannot afford to build up their levees at a grave disadvantage.

The threats posed by these unlawful changes are real and will likely intensify as climate change brings more intense storms and flooding. For instance, during the most extreme flood events, communities around Hannibal, Missouri are projected to experience an additional foot or more of floodwaters due to the unlawful actions of neighboring levee districts.

Most Endangered River Status

Each year grassroots river groups team up with American Rivers to use the Most Endangered Rivers status to help save local rivers through political action and policy advocacy. Most Endangered River status is granted by the nonprofit American Rivers to ten rivers based on the magnitude of the threat, the significance of the river, and the likelihood of achieving change. Advocates can use the

Most Endangered report to engage the public to take action and

to convince decision makers to do the right thing for rivers and for the people and wildlife they support.

The Upper Mississippi River is an important part of our cultural, economic, and natural heritage. It has served as the life force of many cultures throughout this nation's history and as inspiration for a rich collection of American music, art, and literature. The Mississippi is also a globally significant flyway used by hundreds of species of birds and provides unique habitat for fish and other wildlife. This significant ecosystem supports commercial and recreational industries, which contribute \$24.6 billion to the region's economy and an estimated 421,000 jobs.

Your Donations Make a Difference

With financial support from our members, Prairie Rivers Network intends to use the Most Endangered Rivers report to spur state and federal agencies to take corrective action to stop levee districts from illegally increasing levee heights. These agencies must work with communities to develop a plan that balances the needs of all affected communities to effectively manage flood risk and deliver the flood and habitat protection we need for healthy communities, ecosystems, and the Upper Mississippi River. //

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Interim Director's Notes



Elliot Brinkman

Spring has finally arrived, and with it comes much needed warmth and renewal. Days are getting longer, birds are chirping, and buds are blooming—it's time to emerge from winter hibernation to enjoy the splendor of nature. My family and I have been doing just that, spending our weekends visiting local parks and natural areas, picnicking, hiking, and fishing. From our reconnection with nature comes a renewed sense of duty to ensure its protection.

The arrival of spring, however, is not all roses. It is often a time of heightened anxiety around flooding, and this year is no exception. As you'll read in our cover article, the Upper Mississippi River was recently listed by American Rivers as one of the most endangered rivers in the United States. The designation comes in response to widespread, illegal levee modifications, which increase flood risk for many communities along the river. Such a designation conjures mixed emotions—sadness for a river that has suffered a century of insult and injury, and hope, because the river could gain some of the recognition it deserves and support it needs.

It's about more than flooding, though. Our big river tells a larger story about how we as a society have treated our environment, and what we value; it is a reflection of how we manage our land and what we put in our water. It's an indicator of how we interact with the complex and interconnected natural world, for better or worse.

Though the challenges we face are indeed serious, it is important to remember that this is a season of renewal, a time for hope. What has been lost can be regained. What has been degraded can be healed. In this issue of our redesigned newsletter, you'll read about the myriad ways PRN is working with our network of members, supporters, and partners to protect water, heal land, and inspire change—stories of hope. I thank you for your support and encourage you, our members and readers, to spread this message of hope. //

At Prairie Rivers Network, we protect water, heal land, and inspire change. Using the creative power of science, law, and collective action, we protect and restore our rivers, return healthy soils and diverse wildlife to our lands, and transform how we care for the earth and for each other.

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WHY WE GIVE TO PRN

Organizations like Prairie Rivers Network are essential to the well-being of our ecosystems across the state of Illinois and beyond. As directors of El Paseo Community Garden and stewards of the El Paseo Trail in Chicago, we share PRN's vision of protecting our rivers, soil, and wildlife. Over the past eight years we



have dedicated our free time to convert a former brownfield site into a place where people can grow healthy

food, pollinators can thrive, and native plants can flourish. We started donating to PRN shortly after our longtime friend, Elliot Brinkman, joined their team. Through him we were exposed to all the amazing work PRN does. We have been members of PRN for over five years now and look forward to continuing our support for this wonderful organization.

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Protect Water

Suspect Damage? Report It!

Spring is here! While you are planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting the fruits of your labor, when you pause to taste some spinach, smell a flower, or watch a bee, please take a moment to look up at your trees. The last few years, many trees and other broadleaf plants throughout Illinois has shown symptoms of off-target herbicide damage. This is likely the result of exposure to volatile plant growth regulator (PGR) herbicides such as dicamba and/or 2, 4-D that are used for weed control on row crop ag fields.

When these PGR herbicides volatilize (think vaporize), they can move long distances and land other places (woodlands, prairies, waterbodies, gardens, organic farms, etc.) at concentrations strong enough to harm trees and plants. While label restrictions are being made to reduce injuries and complaints due to applicator error, the real problem with many PGR herbicides (volatility) is not being addressed.

Stunted, curled, and/or cupped leaves are some of the more obvious signs of potential off-target herbicide injury. Redbuds, dogwoods, sycamores, oaks, and box elder are among the many trees that have shown symptoms. Also, many native wildflowers and important food crops such as fruit trees, tomatoes, and grapes, have exhibited symptoms of herbicide damage. To see photos of plants with typical symptoms of herbicide damage, see the Prairie Rivers Network website.

PRN and our partners are working hard to keep these harmful herbicides from harming you, your crops, local specialty growers with orchards and organic farms, and our environment. We realize that many people don't even know what symptoms of herbicide injury look like and where to report injuries. However, this information is critical to our ability to push for protections against harmful chemicals.

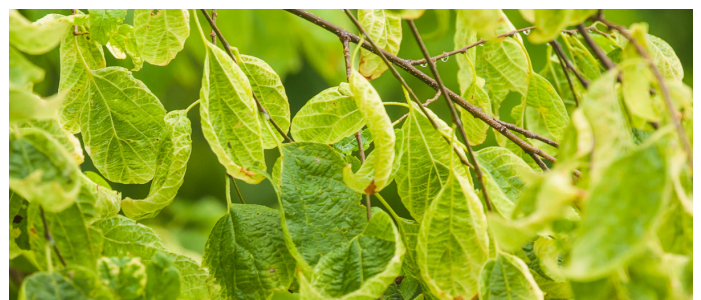
You can do two things! First, if you see damage, we ask that you please let us

know through our online monitoring form at **prairierivers.org/monitoring**. Here you will learn how to monitor and document symptoms. If you have a google account, you can upload your photos and document what you see in just a few minutes by using our online form at **prairierivers.org/report**. The more we know about when and where symptoms of injury are occurring, the better we can protect our environment.

Secondly, we also ask that if you suspect herbicide damage please fill out a complaint form on the Illinois Department of Ag (IDOA) website: **<http://tinyurl.com/treemonitoring>**

We urge you to do this, even if you live in the middle of town! Reporting damage to IDOA is important. They use the complaint information to make regulatory and enforcement decisions.

We can all do our part to protect specialty growers, wildlife habitat, and our precious trees from these volatile herbicides. Take action by reporting symptoms using our monitoring program and by filing a complaint with IDOA. //



Redbud showing symptoms of curling and cupping.

Kim Erndt-Pitcher provides technical and organizing expertise for pollinator habitat and regenerative agriculture programs downstate.



Heal Land

What is Healthy Soil?

Soil health is the latest catchword in sustainable agriculture. We keep hearing how farming practices such as cover crops, reduced tillage, and diverse rotations can improve soil health, but what does this mean? Why should we care if soil is healthy? In this article, we will look at some concrete outcomes of improving soil health and why it matters.

What is Soil Health?

Before we can get to what is healthy soil, let's start with what is soil. Soil is made up of minerals, organic matter, water, air, and living organisms. It is both the food source for plant roots and soil organisms as well as the structure that they live in. Though it is often dismissed as just dirt, it actually contains a complex ecosystem of interconnected soil organisms that contribute to many of the soil characteristics that make land productive. For example, the water cycle, nitrogen cycle, and carbon cycle are all mediated by living organisms. Soil health is therefore a measure of a soil's capacity to function, just as our health is measured by our body's ability to function.

Why does it matter?

Plants rely on their soil organisms in the same way we depend on the microbes living in our intestines. They assist with digestion, provide nutrients we cannot access, and protect us from disease. When people have fewer or less diverse gut flora, they tend to get sick more easily or just don't feel well. The same is true for plants growing in unhealthy soil; they just don't grow well where we see compaction, reduced drainage, and nutrient run off.

Plants depend on soil to provide certain functions. A healthy soil has a stable soil structure, containing an abundance of diverse soil organisms, and keeping nutrients in place so that they are available for plants and soil organisms. A soil ecosystem with these attributes provides a better environment for root development, has improved water management and nutrient availability in both wet and dry conditions, and reduces soil pest and disease pressures.

Micro-organisms consume plant matter and other organisms. As they digest their food, they exude sticky carbon substances that stick soil particles together. This is how you get beautiful crumbly soil everyone wants. This structure increases the pore space in soil, which allows it to drain when it's wet and stores water in the summer when it's dry. Pore space also brings

more air to the roots.

Soil microbes subsist on dead plant matter and organisms, as

well as carbon secreted by plant roots. When there isn't a living root in the ground, or plant matter on the surface, the next best source of carbon for microbes are the exudates holding the soil particles together. Therefore it is important to make sure the microbiome is fed.

The soil beneath our feet is not just a structure to hold plants up. It is a complex ecosystem—an interconnected web of organisms and their physical environment. All of the various nutrient cycles, the water cycle, nitrogen cycle, and carbon cycle are all mediated by living organisms. The state of this ecosystem affects how well these other systems work.

How does this happen?

Plants and soil organisms alter their environment to make it more favorable for their growth. These processes are often described as building their house, storing food, and encouraging beneficial neighbors to live near them. When we have lots of different kinds of organisms in an ecosystem, they make it harder for pathogens and pests to establish themselves because they must compete with the current inhabitants. Pest predators will also be more abundant when they have a consistent supply of prey throughout the year; and remember, not all prey species are pests. Most insects and microbes are either beneficial or benign.

How do you get these benefits?

There are many opportunities to improve soil health, and thanks to PRN donors we can get the word out about these methods. Practices such as cover crops, reduced tillage, and diverse rotations improve soil health by feeding the soil biology and protecting the soil structure they've created. However, this is a dynamic system that can either help or hinder crop production. For example, under wet, warm

Continued on Page 6

Catie Gregg coordinates our campaigns to expand the adoption of conservation cropping systems in Illinois.



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We also thank the 213 members that donated under \$50, but are not listed here.

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of our supporter recognition. We apologize for any errors and urge you to notify us of any corrections.

THANK YOU



Inspire Change

What is a Just Transition?

As more studies are released and dire environmental warnings continue to be issued, it is clear that we must act now and boldly if we want to stabilize our warming planet. Limiting global warming to 1.5°C will require a transition away from dirty forms of energy towards cleaner, renewable energy sources. In so doing, we must also recognize the need for what's been termed a "Just Transition," an acknowledgement that people and communities who have historically relied on jobs and industries that have polluted our environment will need other environmentally sustainable economies to take their place. As fossil fuel companies close their doors, communities stand to lose hundreds of jobs, lose a large portion of their tax base, and to inherit a legacy of pollution, including coal ash.

Acknowledgement of the need for a just transition has grown in recent years. The 2015 Paris Agreement solidified the need in the climate movement when it stated, "Taking into account the imperatives of a Just Transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities." The U.S. House Green New Deal Resolution which recently has been making headlines across the country mentions a "Just Transition" in its first point. It states that the government is duty bound to, "achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers."

Engaging Communities

There is a saying in the labor movement that "Transition is assured. Justice is not." The transition to a clean energy economy is already underway due to U.S. coal plant age and ever cheaper renewables. How we handle issues of justice and equity during the change is up to us. A just transition to renewable energy will involve engaging these communities and workers and supporting them with resources and policies to advance social, environmental, and economic solutions.



Amanda Pankau coordinates our campaign to expand clean energy policy in Illinois.



Following a nationwide trend, Illinois has started to see the transformation of our energy system with coal plants closing in Wood River, Vermilion, Meredosia, and Hutonsville recently, and Dynegy-Visira threatening closure of additional downstate power plants. Thanks to the Future Energy Jobs Act, we've seen great increases in solar job growth, but we haven't seen specific policies targeting development in transitioning communities.

Plans and Policies

Despite the stated need, it is clear that a just transition will not happen by itself. A report from the Just Transition Centre states, "It requires plans and policies. Workers and communities dependent on fossil fuels will not find alternative sources of income and revenue overnight." Without leadership and action from the federal government, it is up to nonprofits, community leaders and stakeholders, and state governments to lead the way in finding plans and policies that help transitioning communities.

Organizations like the Just Transition Fund (JTF) and the Delta Institute have recognized the need for deliberate transition planning. Just Transition Fund, an organization with a mission to "create economic opportunity for the frontline communities and workers hardest hit by the transition away from coal," held its first Midwest meeting in September 2018 and has increased support for Midwest communities and organizations. In 2018, Chicago-based Delta Institute released its Coal Plant Redevelopment Roadmap, a guide for communities in transition. Prairie Rivers Network is working with these organizations, as well as our Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition (ICJC) partners to ensure that communities have the support, power, and policies to ensure that jobs and justice are at the center of Illinois clean energy economy.

Clean Energy Jobs Act

Illinois' new Clean Energy Jobs Act, a bill championed by the ICJC and introduced to the state legislature in February 2019, seeks to begin policy implementation around just transition in Illinois. In fact, the bill has been called a "remarkable test

Continued on Page 7

Coal Ash Cleanup Now

By Andrew Rehn



PRN members, partners, and the public voice their concerns at the Middle Fork hearing.

Illinois needs legislation to direct coal ash cleanup now more than ever before. For years, Prairie Rivers Network and partners have pushed for the Illinois EPA to develop strong state rules that will protect the public from the toxic leachate in coal ash dumps. Efforts to push for a strong rule have failed, and the rulemaking process has been

stalled since late 2017. In the meantime, the federal coal ash rule has revealed the extent of the groundwater pollution from these dumps (see our report at illinoiscoalash.org).

We cannot wait any longer. The federal coal ash rule will require coal ash dumps designated as “unlined” to begin closing by October 2020. Closure means one of two things - they either cap the coal ash and leave it forever in unlined ponds OR the coal ash is removed and brought to a safe, modern landfill for permanent dry storage. So while the federal rule will require the dumps to close, we are worried that it may not require closure by removal for unlined ponds. Certainly we anticipate that the owners of the coal ash will argue that the federal rule does not require removal.

Here is where Illinois has an opportunity to provide clarity on how coal ash dumps should be closed. Prairie Rivers Network has been working with State Senator Scott Bennett and our partner groups to introduce coal ash legislation to ensure coal ash stored in unsafe, unlined dumps must be removed and placed in a modern, lined landfill with proper monitoring. //

Land from page 4

conditions, some soil bacteria will convert anhydrous ammonium fertilizer to nitrate, which is water soluble and can be washed off the field. Soil ecology is always an active player in our cropping systems. The only choice is whether to work together or not.

The point of focusing on soil health instead of just nutrient pollution is that poor soil health results in a leaky system, which leads to nutrient pollution. Only so much progress can be made by changing how much and when fertilizer is applied, or trying to catch nutrients after they've left the

field. To truly address nutrient pollution requires a systems change. When a field's soil biology is healthy, it is much more forgiving of inevitable variations in weather and fertilizer practices. Investing in soil health can turn this leaky system where nutrients are lost into a tight system where plants and soil organisms trade nutrients with a handshake. //

TAKE ACTION!

Sign our petition and join PRN in calling on Illinois legislators to take action to address Illinois' coal ash crisis!

Illinois residents and taxpayers deserve clean, safe water, and we refuse to allow out-of-state corporations to leave us with pollution and clean-up costs. We need the State of Illinois to take decisive action now to address Illinois' coal ash crisis, and deliver comprehensive reform to state standards that have lacked necessary protections for too long.

Take action now! Go to:

prairierivers.org/petition

Sign the petition, and tell Illinois legislators that we need permanent protections that stop coal ash pollution, that gives the public a voice in the process, and that guarantees we hold polluters accountable for their mess. Thank you for taking action and for supporting this multi-year effort!

Action
 prairieriversnetwork **Alert!**

You Can Protect Our Soil!
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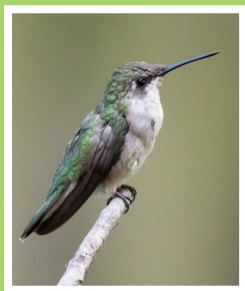
You've seen the news. You've heard the threats to wildlife, our water, and the environment. Our mission is to protect water, heal land, and inspire change, and we need your sustained support to do that.

Give to Prairie Rivers Network, a little or a lot, so your voice is heard in Springfield and the halls of Congress. You can hold Dynegy accountable for its coal ash on the Middle Fork and you can protect wildlife for future generations to enjoy.

Become a sustaining, monthly donor so your membership renews automatically. Replace that cup of coffee with a \$5 monthly donation or for \$21 a month become a PRN major donor and you will be invited to our exclusive Spring event only for major donors.

Thank you for your support and making a difference!

prairierivers.org/sustainer



Protecting Pollinators

By Kim Erndt-Pitcher and Robert Hirschfeld

This winter, Habitat and Agricultural Programs Specialist, Kim Erndt-Pitcher received a grant from Patagonia to “Promote and Protect Pollinator and Beneficial Insect Habitat” on farms and private land in agricultural landscapes. With these funds and member donations, Kim will work with numerous volunteers and five farmers and landowners to prepare for, install, and maintain 50-70 single species plots of native flowering plants. The species plots will be used as seed sources for spreading the word (and seed) about the important roles native plants, pollinators, and insects play in balancing nature. Diversity is the key! Together, landowners, PRN staff, and volunteers will help maintain plots and collect and clean seed. Seed will be shared with farmers and landowners who are committed to protecting monarchs, bees, birds, and more.

There are many teaching and learning moments that will be shared throughout this process. We plan on connecting people to their local farms, teaching about plant and insect ecology, demonstrating the beauty and awesomeness of the world of bugs, and having a lot of fun! Stay tuned! Kim—along with our staff video guru Robert Hirschfeld—will document this journey with the landowners, the changes in the land, and the changes in the sights, sounds, and feelings we all experience through this physical work. We will share it with you over the coming months and years. //



Randy Madding, PRN's Kim Erndt-Pitcher and her husband Lennie after collecting seed.

Inspire from page 5

case of one of the Green New Deal's core principles” — social justice (<http://tinyurl.com/VoxILGreenNewDeal>).

The bill calls on the state to ensure a just transition, providing support for communities and workers impacted by closures in the form of “new business tax incentives, workforce training, site clean-up and reuse, and local tax revenue replacement.” The bill will define “Economically Impacted Communities and Workers,” create “Clean Energy Empowerment Zones,” convene stakeholders for input, and even prioritize site revitalization, including coal ash clean-up. The bill goes further, creating equity actions in job training and workforce

development to support communities of color and low-income communities that have been disproportionately impacted by past environmental and social injustices.

The transformations needed to limit global warming will require a massive restructuring of our energy economy, and our work on this is made possible by continued support and donations from our members. Thank you! If done with Just Transition practices and policies in mind, together we have an opportunity to support communities that will be hit the hardest and to raise up those that have been left out in the past. //



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