



# Coal Ash Win a Grassroots Effort

By Andrew Rehn

This spring after years of work, advocacy, and grassroots organization, the Illinois General Assembly passed landmark legislation that will help protect the rivers and water of our state from coal ash.

Coal ash is the toxic by-product of burning coal, stored in massive storage ponds at coal-fired power plants throughout Illinois. Coal ash leaches harmful pollutants into water, including arsenic, chromium, and lead. Most of the state's coal ash impoundments are unlined, so toxic contaminants spread to our groundwater and drinking water. With the passage of the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act (SB 9), Illinois has taken a historic step toward regulating toxic coal ash.

The seed of SB 9 was planted long ago and tirelessly tended by community leaders and environmental advocacy organizations. These folks have brought lawsuits to

protect our water from coal ash while elevating the issue in the public's eye. They contributed hundreds of hours of testimony at countless public hearings and met with their legislators again and again to educate them about coal ash.

Last fall marked a new phase in this many-year fight against coal ash pollution, one that would ultimately lay the groundwork for passage of SB 9. Grassroots leaders from coal ash impacted-communities in Waukegan, Vermilion, Peoria, Springfield, and Alton convened to discuss how coal ash should be regulated in Illinois. They identified core principles to guide the drafting of the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act, including 1) permanent protection that stops ongoing groundwater contamination from Illinois coal ash dumps, 2) meaningful public participation to ensure a voice for communities affected by coal ash, and 3) financial guarantees that hold polluters, not taxpayers, accountable for the cost and clean-up of their coal ash mess.

While community leaders crafted the guiding principles of coal ash regulation, PRN and other

environmental groups drafted a report on the statewide impact of coal ash pollution on groundwater. That report, titled *Cap and Run: Toxic Coal Ash Left Behind by Big Polluters Threatens Illinois Water*, collected industry-reported data to show that 22 of the 24 Illinois power plants storing coal ash were polluting groundwater above health-based thresholds; it also showed the vast majority of coal ash ponds in Illinois are unlined.

These efforts came together at a late-November press conference in the Capitol, where grassroots leaders, environmental advocates, and state legislators announced the release of the *Cap and Run* report and called for the new Illinois General Assembly to pass coal ash legislation in the coming year. Monumental efforts from these groups carried SB 9 through both the House and the Senate and to the Governor's desk where it was signed.

While passage of SB 9 is a moment to celebrate, it is not the end of the fight against coal ash pollution. The IEPA will begin drafting necessary rules to guide the law's implementation, and PRN and partners across the state are going to ensure we are permanently protected from coal ash pollution. //

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# Director's Notes



**Elliot Brinkman**

It has been a great summer so far at PRN. In summer, we're often afforded an opportunity to rest, recharge, and reflect on our work to ensure a clean, healthy environment. In doing so, we return to the work with clearer minds and greater resolve to do good.

Many PRN staff and board members kicked off the season by attending the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Annual Meeting in St. Louis in June. The meeting was a great opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate our role as the Illinois affiliate of NWF, connect with and learn from a vast network of conservationists from all over the country, and gain support for the important work that we do back home.

As the state affiliate of NWF, we are able to draw upon the resources and expertise of one of the most successful conservation organizations in the nation. This can take many forms, from partnering on projects to building staff and organizational capacity. We are also able to connect with other affiliates, learning from what other organizations around the country are doing to advance conservation and sharing our own experiences and successes.

One of the most exciting aspects of the annual meeting is our ability to influence the policies and priorities of a national organization through an affiliate-led resolution process (picture "model UN"—state flags and all). Affiliates bring forward resolutions on a variety of topics to be debated and voted on. This year, PRN brought two resolutions—one that outlines the full scope of duties assumed by states to care for wildlife and another which calls for restrictions on harmful herbicides. Through the hard work of board and staff, both resolutions passed unanimously!

In this issue of our newsletter, you'll read stories about how we're making a local impact on a variety of issues of national—and even global—significance. It is through partnerships with organizations like NWF and support from members and supporters like you that we can magnify our voice and our impact! //

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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# WELCOME!

PRN is delighted to announce the addition of Charlotte Westcott to our board of directors. Charlotte is the owner and operator of Dandelion, a downtown Champaign fixture selling vintage and used clothing. Born and raised in Champaign-Urbana, she returned to the community after spending seven years in the Pacific Northwest where she studied cultural/environmental anthropology and visual art. She is an enthusiastic supporter of all things local. Welcome, Charlotte!



PRN is also happy to announce that former intern Ryan Grosso has joined the staff as our new Water Resources Associate. Ryan will coordinate our efforts to conserve important wildlife habitat and to promote ecologically-sound river management. Ryan graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign this past May, and we're excited to have him on full-time. Welcome, Ryan!



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# Protect Water

## Stories from the Floodplain

In our Spring newsletter, PRN Attorney and Policy Specialist Kim Knowles wrote about the Upper Mississippi River being designated “Most Endangered” by American Rivers. The designation came during a period of severe Spring flooding and continued efforts by agricultural and levee districts to raise their levees beyond permitted heights. The Mississippi is America’s grandest river, stretching from Lake Itasca in Minnesota and threading through the country’s heartland to the Gulf of Mexico. Sometimes lost in its grandeur are the communities nestled along its banks, communities that could see an extra foot or more of flooding due to unlawful levee heights across the river or upstream.

For all intents and purposes, communities are weaponizing their levee systems, willing to push more water onto their neighbors just for a couple extra feet of protection in the event of a severe flood. I’ve been putting together an audio story to share the stories of people along the river.

I chose to focus on Hannibal, Missouri. It’s a small river town about 100 miles northwest of St. Louis, and it’s known for being the boyhood home of Mark Twain. The first person I met was Nancy Guyton, the secretary of an organization called Neighbors of the Mississippi. They’ve been fighting against the unlawful levee heights, particularly in the Sny Levee Drainage District in Illinois. She’s been doing this work for nearly 10 years and knows the conflict better than most people. Nancy offered to give me a tour of the levees in the Sny district, so we met in downtown Hannibal and quickly crossed the bridge over the Mississippi River back into Illinois.

Nancy’s husband owns land in Annada, Missouri, about an hour downstream from Hannibal. Between heavy rains and a high river, their fields have been flooded since April. It wasn’t until the week of June 24 that there was even a chance to plant crops on their highland away from the Mississippi. This image is in stark contrast to the Sny with its well-manicured

levees protecting hundreds of acres of row crops already planted for the season. It’s hard to say that the taller levees upstream are the sole reason for water in Nancy’s fields, but they sure haven’t helped. As we drove on a gravel road next to a section of the Sny levees, Nancy said, “It’s a little upsetting to see people go to this degree knowing they’re harming others and their chance of a good livelihood.”

Nancy and I parted ways once we arrived in downtown Hannibal, and it wasn’t long after that I met with Steve Ayers. He has owned a pottery shop since 1988, living in Hannibal long enough to experience the flood of 1993, and has seen how its flood wall has improved business in the downtown area. For a while, it was hard for him to believe that the levees across the river were exceeding height restrictions. He changed his mind when he saw the levees himself, and it became clear that the Sny was willing to do what they could to protect themselves at the detriment of their neighbors.

Levee heights may be a complicated issue, but it is more important than ever to advocate for sound river management and to hold those who are violating the rules accountable for their actions. You can hear more about my experience in Hannibal in the podcast at [prairierivers.org/podcast](http://prairierivers.org/podcast). //



Steve Ayers sits in his pottery shop in Hannibal, Missouri



Ryan coordinates our efforts to conserve important wildlife habitat along the Illinois River and to promote ecologically-sound river management.



# Heal Land

## How Will We Save Biodiversity?

The threats to biodiversity are daunting. How can we even begin to tackle this problem when the scale is global. And civilizational. And requires a revolution in how we think, act, and organize.

Let's start by using our imagination. . . Standing outside your front door, you jump up and fly straight up, moving through the clouds, passing through the atmosphere. Keep going until you're out there in the void alone, floating. It looks as though you could hold Earth in your hands.

There. Now we can begin to see the scale of the problem facing everything living on that beautiful blue orb. While you hold the planet, let us give you a (very abridged) overview of the most recent report released by a UN committee on biodiversity, titled Nature's Dangerous Decline, 'Unprecedented', Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating'. It's an alarm bell and a call to action.

"The overwhelming evidence of the IPBES Global Assessment, from a wide range of different fields of knowledge, presents an ominous picture," said IPBES Chair, Sir Robert Watson. "We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide."

Nature's decline, the loss of biodiversity on our planet, is a HUGE issue and one we must address. Below are 5 key drivers of this decline.

**1) Changes in Land and Sea Use:** Approximately 75% of land environments and 66% of marine environments have been highly altered by humans. Cities, roads, mines, farmland, floating trash, algal blooms, wetlands drained, etc.

**2) Direct Exploitation of Living Things:** Over-hunting/fishing/harvesting sometimes leading to extinction; logging, depletion of soil life and fertility, etc.

**3) Climate Change:** Sea level rise; temperature increases; desertification; extreme fire & weather events; ocean temperature changes; loss of coral ecosystems, sea ice, and permafrost.

**4) Pollution (land and water):** Fossil fuel extraction and use; mining; industrial waste and by-products; home, agricultural, and community pesticide use/drift/contamination; medical waste; human/animal waste; plastic and trash pollution; air pollution, etc.

**5) Alien and Invasive Species:** Around the world they compete with native species for living space and survival resources and are altering

ecosystem function at an unprecedented rate.

We understand this can seem overwhelming.

If we all do not do our part locally AND globally to stop this trend, the future looks stark indeed. But we can push for the transformative change necessary to save Earth.

Now let's begin your descent. (Appreciate the beauty you see.) As you return, you lose sight of the coastal contours of the U.S. The Midwest fills your field of vision, the Great Lakes, and the vast expanse of monocrop agriculture. Let's pause here as we consider Illinois, bordered on three sides by Lake Michigan and two great rivers, with numerous riverways coursing through the heartland. What's at stake for Illinois in terms of biodiversity?

Land gently on your front stoop and think about what you will do to help.

### What We're Doing

We are pushing for transformative change, right here in our own backyard. We protect our rivers, lakes, and drinking water resources from pollution and invasive species. We work with partners to protect, restore, and enhance habitat for wildlife from the smallest bees, to bobcats, to endangered mussels. With farmers and numerous partners, we promote regenerative agriculture to rebuild healthy living soil, protect water, help communities, and support biodiversity. We help protect specialty growers, trees, and habitat from harmful herbicides and insecticides. We promote the use of renewable energy sources to reduce climate change. We bring people together to improve the management of private lands, rivers, and floodplains. We do this work, with the collective "we" (that includes you), to change the minds of our neighbors, the actions of our community, the stance of decision makers, and the behaviors and policies that ultimately support the CHANGE we need to reach beyond our choir.

We have to. //

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



# Inspire Change

## Solar Program Opens In Illinois

### Prairie Rivers Network Launches Community Education Campaign

One of the promises of the Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) is equitable access to the benefits of the new clean energy economy. Solar for All is one FEJA program designed to deliver on that promise. The program sets aside money to incentivize solar projects in low income communities, providing financial relief to families struggling with rising energy costs and to nonprofits and public agencies serving low income families.

Solar for All just got up and running this summer, and PRN is helping spread the word with a series of community education sessions to be held at local churches and social service agencies in the Champaign-Urbana area. The sessions will focus on three Solar for All incentive programs: Low Income Distributed Generation; Low Income Community Solar; and Nonprofit Organizations and Public Facilities. Under each of these programs, participants receive similar benefits. No upfront costs and guaranteed savings provisions ensure that participants will pay less than they currently pay. In many cases, electricity costs will be substantially less.

### Distributed Generation (DG) aka Rooftop

This program offers incentives to developers who build solar projects on single or multi-family residences that house low income families. Low income is 80% of median area income (MAI). In the Champaign-Urbana area, 80% of MAI is \$55,600 for a family of four.

### Community Solar

Think of this as a solar farm with multiple solar panels housed on 10+ acres of land. These projects can be built within neighborhoods or on vacant land elsewhere. Qualified low income people participate by buying subscriptions in the project. This can be a good option for renters and for

households that are not solar ready because the roofs are in disrepair or are too shaded from the sun.

### Nonprofit Organizations & Public Facilities

This program allows nonprofits and public facilities that are critical low income service providers and are located within low income communities to host solar projects on their buildings. In this program, the nonprofit or public agency enjoys the electricity savings so that more operating dollars can be expended on the organizational mission.

Of course the benefits of Solar for All go beyond financial savings. Solar energy decreases our reliance on coal and natural gas, reducing the emissions that are warming our planet and polluting our air and water. With legislatively mandated job training, FEJA and Solar for All also help create new living-wage jobs for traditionally marginalized people like foster care alumni, people of color, and the formerly incarcerated. Prairie Rivers Network supports Illinois' Solar for All program for all of these reasons. With this program we can transform solar from what was a luxury good for middle- and upper-class households to a viable option for a broader range of families. //



PRN will begin hosting Solar for All events in Champaign beginning in August



**Kim Knowles** leads our efforts to protect and restore rivers and floodplains, and works to strengthen renewable energy policy in Illinois with a focus on low income solar programs.



# Annual Dinner on Oct. 25

Get ready for some fun, thoughtful conversation, and good times with friends at this year's Annual Dinner on October 25. The evening will kick off with a reception, silent auction, and dinner with keynote speaker Dr. Jonathan Lundgren.

A former USDA scientist, Lundgren has been a TEDx speaker and was featured in the Washington Post for his research on the damage that pesticides have inflicted on bees and butterflies. He filed a whistleblower lawsuit alleging that the USDA suppressed his research that neonicotinoid pesticides provided "little to no benefit to farmers and adversely affected bees."



Jonathan  
Lundgren

Lundgren is an outspoken advocate for unbiased science and critic of industrial agriculture, particularly those practices and chemicals that have been catastrophic for biodiversity, leaving our landscape largely denuded of any species other than corn and soybeans. He will deliver a message that central Illinois desperately needs to hear and heed. We're thrilled to present him as this year's speaker.

Lundgren is an agroecologist, Director of the ECDYSIS Foundation, and the CEO of Blue Dasher Farm in South Dakota. He received his PhD in Entomology from the University of Illinois in 2004, and he's a former scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service. He is also a farmer and beekeeper.

Tickets will be available at [prairierivers.org/dinner](http://prairierivers.org/dinner) in early September! //

**YOU WON'T WANT TO MISS THIS  
YEAR'S SPEAKER!**

## TAKE ACTION!

The Clean Energy Jobs Act (CEJA) is an important piece of legislation that will tackle climate change and pollution while promoting jobs and economic opportunity. We need you to write Governor Pritzker and your Illinois Senator and Representative in Springfield and ask them to support this legislation. Developed and championed by the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition, CEJA will:

- Transition Illinois to a carbon-free power sector by 2030
- Bring Illinois to 100% clean renewable energy by 2050
- Tackle pollution from the transportation sector
- Grow clean energy jobs and training opportunities, especially for economically disadvantaged communities and transitioning fossil fuel communities and workers.

If you think the time has come to take bold action on climate change while ensuring access to good jobs, make your voice heard. Send a letter at [prairierivers.org/ceja](http://prairierivers.org/ceja)!

**Action Alert!**  
prairieriversnetwork

## Call for Nominations

It's that time of year again when PRN gets to recognize the selfless work of a river champion! The River Steward Award honors a volunteer who goes above and beyond to protect the water, land, and wildlife of Illinois. If you know of someone deserving of recognition, please send the nominee's contact information, your contact information, and a summary of the nominee's river conservation efforts to Sarah Scott at [sscott@prairierivers.org](mailto:sscott@prairierivers.org). Nominations are due by September 6, 2019. //



## Past Award Winners

2018 Tom Eckels  
2017 Seth Brady and Randy Smith  
2016 Bruce Colravy  
2015 Carla Murray  
2014 Pete Leki  
2013 Suzanne Smith  
2012 Brenda Dilts  
2011 Scott Hays  
2010 Kathy Andria  
2009 Gary Mechanic  
2008 Joyce Blumenshine  
2007 Mary Pat Holtschlag  
2006 Fran Caffee  
2005 Jan Holder

# LEAVE A LEGACY!

Illinois has an abundance of fresh water. 120,000 miles of rivers and streams provide us with drinking water, give home to countless wild species, and provide flowing waters for recreation and navigation. The benefits of rivers are truly innumerable. Rivers are the lifeblood of Illinois, and we must protect them.

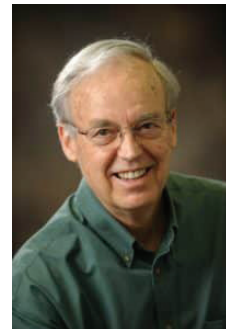
You can help ensure that PRN has the continued resources to protect clean water and healthy rivers with a gift to our Endowment and/or a planned giving bequest to PRN.

Join our Legacy Society by giving to our Endowment today or set up your planned giving and leave a legacy of clean water and healthy rivers. For more information visit [prairierivers.org/legacy](http://prairierivers.org/legacy) or contact Elliot Brinkman at [ebrinkman@prairierivers.org](mailto:ebrinkman@prairierivers.org) or 217/344-2371 ext. 202.



## NWF Honors Bullard

Longtime PRN member and board member Clark Bullard received the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) National Conservation Special Achievement Award at its annual meeting in June in St. Louis. He received the award for his commitment to conservation in the state, his contributions to PRN, and his work to protect the Middle Fork of the Vermilion, Boneyard Creek, and the Sangamon River.



“Through tireless efforts to protect land, water, and cultural resources, you have made a measurable impact on wildlife and wild places and serve as an inspiration to others,” wrote National Wildlife Federation President and CEO Collin O’Mara in his letter announcing Bullard’s award.

“Clark has been an amazing advocate for rivers and wildlife in Illinois,” says PRN Executive Director Elliot Brinkman. “His work has shaped the efforts of many activists and causes. This award is well deserved for his decades-long commitment to keeping our water and rivers protected.”

Bullard’s conservation efforts got their start in the mid-1960s with the push to stop a planned dam on the Middle Fork of the Vermilion. The work of Clark and many other river advocates culminated in the Middle Fork receiving National Scenic River status in 1989. He has remained an important figure in protecting the Boneyard Creek in Urbana, the Sangamon River, and Lake Springfield, and he continues to advocate for the rivers of Illinois. Congratulations, Clark! //



CLARK BULLARD ROCKED A LOT OF BOATS TO SAVE THE VERMILION RIVER. IN ILLINOIS. Photograph: David E. Sauer

Clark Bullard was featured in *New Choices* magazine in September, 1990

## One Last Step for Mine?

In 2019, a year in which the Illinois legislature is seriously considering the pathway to 100% clean energy, Illinois is also on the verge of approving a new underground coal mine in Vermilion County. After nearly 10 years in review, the mining permit for Sunrise Coal’s Bulldog Mine has been issued.

Many local residents are concerned about long-term harmful impacts coal mining can have on their communities: contaminated wells and groundwater, polluted air from dirty coal dust, damaged roads from heavy trucks, and contamination from toxic chemicals

that can leak from slurry impoundments to neighboring farmland. The Salt Fork of the Vermilion River will bear the burden of the discharges from this mine. Stand Up To Coal, a volunteer group, has worked to protect their land, water, air, and communities from the impacts of this proposed mine for nearly a decade.

One last opportunity to challenge the mining permit remains - an administrative review. This process would evaluate whether or not the approved permit meets the letter of the law. Stand Up To Coal and other nearby landowners have filed for a review of the permit. If the permit is found to meet the letter of the law, the mine will still need to secure a water discharge permit from the Illinois EPA to begin operation. //



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## PRN Membership Levels

						
Headwaters Circle	River Champions	River Protectors	River Stewards	River Guardians	River Defenders	Members
\$5,000	\$2,500-\$4,999	\$1,000-\$2,499	\$500-\$999	\$250-\$499	\$100-\$249	\$1-\$99

# Save the Dates!

September 4  
**Wild & Scenic Film Festival**  
Art Theater, Champaign

October 25  
**Annual Dinner**  
I Hotel and Conference Center  
Champaign

