



# What We Accomplished Together

Around this time each year, Prairie Rivers Network staff look back over the past twelve months and take stock of where we are in our fight to protect water, heal land, and inspire change. Here we wanted to reflect on a personal level the successes of 2019.



### Kim Erndt-Pitcher

I'm very proud of the work we have done with dedicated partners and volunteers to

expand the reach and impact of our Tree and Plant Health Monitoring Program. Together we are working hard to protect our ecosystems and our specialty growers from off-target herbicide injuries.

### Catie Gregg

I am most proud of my work with the City of Decatur. We are helping them access cutting edge research to justify treating their drinking water for nitrates at a higher standard

than the current federal standard. This would be a huge statement on the importance of addressing nutrient pollution in Illinois.

### Ryan Grosso

In 2019, we launched our first podcast, *Stories from the Floodplain*. Two episodes have been released and both are meant to inform and entertain listeners on important stories about the people and environment along our rivers.



### Robert Hirschfeld

I am proud of all the messaging and media we've put out throughout 2019 about the

importance of biodiversity, especially the importance of those small and often-overlooked organisms that permeate the soil and are the building blocks of our lives, and the life we see all around us.

### Kim Knowles

It's been really great connecting with and learning from local groups and communities we don't usually work with. I've met so many new people that have

helped me shape the Solar for All grassroots education program and make it more responsive to local needs.



### Jeff Kohmstedt

I'm most proud of the Run for Wildlife athletes. This year they raised an \$8,445!

It was also my first year running the program, so its success was particularly meaningful.

### Vickie Nudelman

I really enjoyed the Wild & Scenic Film Festival this year and was delighted to see how many members came out to watch the films. We featured a short film this year on the National Parks, which is close to my heart because we have been visiting a national park almost every summer since our boys could ride on our shoulders.



### Amanda Pankau

I am really excited that we hosted nine clean energy community events around the state,

reaching over 350 people, to build support for the Clean Energy Jobs Act (CEJA).

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## DIRECTOR'S NOTES



**Elliot Brinkman**

As 2019 comes to a close, we get a chance to reflect on our many victories, and of course, the many challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. In this edition of our newsletter, you'll find several stories of impact—details on what we've been able to accomplish in our efforts to protect water, heal land, and inspire change.

It's always good to take stock of what we've been able to get done, but it's important we don't spend too much time resting on our laurels or in a state of contemplation. Why? Because the year 2020 is upon us.

What once felt like some far-away future is now here, and with it comes unprecedented challenges. Climate change, global species decline, and threats to our lands and waters are all intertwined, and together they have the potential to affect every facet of our lives.

In 2020, we'll continue to rise to the occasion—creating rules to protect our rivers and streams from the threat of toxic coal ash. We'll confront climate change by ushering in a cleaner and more just energy system through policies like the Clean Energy Jobs Act.

We'll help in creating ecologically healthy and resilient ecosystems by restoring our rivers, streams, and the lands along them. We'll promote flood risk management policy that keeps people safe through natural solutions like wetland restoration and floodplain reconnection.

We'll continue to craft and put forward a vision of a healthier food system, promoting farming practices that heal our soil and protect our water. We'll address the threats to biodiversity and human health posed by harmful herbicides and pesticides.

All along the way, we'll continue to tell our story—crafting compelling messages that inspire action. With the help of members and supporters like you, we've been able to accomplish so much. In 2020, let's fill these pages with even more stories of 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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## IRA CHARITABLE DONATIONS

If you've reached 70½ years old by the end of the year, federal tax laws may offer a way for you to help PRN. Regular IRA holders are required to take minimum annual distributions from their IRAs and report them as federal taxable income. You could donate all or part of that distribution to PRN, with the possibility of a charitable tax deduction. But for many supporters a better option exists.

The alternative is to have your IRA distribution sent directly to PRN as a donation. When that happens, the distribution is no longer taxable income to you. There is no worry then about limits on charitable tax deductions, and you can do this even if you don't itemize your deductions. Details are available at: [prairierivers.org/legacy](http://prairierivers.org/legacy)



Photo credit: Jason Lindsey

# Protect Water

## A Year of Victories

This year has presented significant hurdles to our water resources with the rollback of the Clean Water Act, significant flooding all year long, and threats posed by polluters. Despite those challenges, together we have taken huge steps in protecting our water in Illinois and beyond.

### Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act

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, and PRN was there every step of the way in crafting the bill, helping organize grassroots turn out, and testifying before the Illinois EPA. The Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act became law in July with the Governor's signature.

### The Middle Fork

Following immense pressure from the public, Dynegy/Vistra decided to revise its massive bank armoring project along the Middle Fork to a more environmentally friendly option. This is a big win! Thanks to everyone who spoke out about this project. Our state and federal lawsuits against the company continue to keep the pressure on the company to clean up the coal ash on the Middle Fork.

### Upper Mississippi

In April, the Upper Mississippi River was designated as one of the ten Most Endangered Rivers in America. While this may not seem like something to celebrate, the designation affords



the river much needed attention and resources, providing PRN and its partners with assistance in our advocacy efforts. The designation has led to heightened



media attention on the issues threatening the river and coordinated advocacy to address those threats.

Working with our partners, PRN has successfully beaten back efforts by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to roll back some of Illinois' most protective flood management regulations.

### Illinois River

Thanks to a legal challenge threatened by PRN and the Sierra Club, an industrial facility that was polluting the Illinois River was forced to clean up its plant and to pay an award of \$75,000, which was donated to the Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge for a wetland restoration project on the Illinois River.

### Cover Crops

The Illinois General Assembly passed a state budget with \$300,000 for crop insurance rewards for farmers who plant cover crops. This is a significant advance for conservation as it encourages farmers to consider planting cover crops to lower their overall crop insurance bill. PRN worked with partners to ensure the budget included this important way to help build healthier soil, reduce runoff, and protect our rivers and drinking water from harmful nitrates.

None of this would be possible if not for the continued support and contributions from our members. Volunteering your time to get signatures, traveling to Springfield for Lobby Day, and the support you give through your donations have had an enormous impact in protecting our water in 2019.

Thank you! //



*Attendees of an IEPA hearing on the Middle Fork show that they want the coal ash moved*

A bullfrog ... ribbit  
(Photo credit: Rob Kanter)





# Heal Land

## Long-Term Challenges, Old & New

We live in an interconnected system. To heal the land requires that we face the threats to it head on: industrialized agriculture, climate change, weakened regulatory protections, and careless polluters. This year, PRN made significant progress in how we view the land and how we heal it together.

### Land & Water Conservation Fund

In February, Congress voted to permanently reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The bipartisan legislation passed both the House and Senate and was signed by the President. The LWCF is important because it helps communities in Illinois and across the country protect and conserve national parks, wildlife refuges, forests, and critical habitat. Permanent reauthorization of LWCF is a huge step forward, and it is a goal PRN has worked towards for years.

### Dog Tooth Bend

Thousands of acres of floodplain land in Dog Tooth Bend in southern Illinois will be placed into wetland and floodplain easements. These will provide relief to farmers whose lands have been rendered unfarmable by Mississippi River floods and gives us an opportunity to restore unique floodplain and wetland habitat.

### ReGenerate IL Summit

The ReGenerate IL Summit took place in March 2019. With our partners in ReGenerate IL, PRN is working with farmers to heal the land by finding more ecologically sustainable ways of farming and expanding markets for regenerative and environmentally responsible food sources. Expanding this movement is critical to its success, and the summit connected farmers with buyers, growers, suppliers, researchers, and commercial consumers.

### Plant Health Monitoring Program

PRN has led the charge in building awareness of the threats posed by volatile herbicides through our Tree and Plant Health Monitoring Program which allows people to document herbicide damage to our crops, trees, and wildlife habitat. Our staff and amazing volunteers have collected data from around the state, documenting symptoms of herbicide-

related injury. PRN plans to issue a summary of the findings this winter.

### Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy

In this past legislative session, we worked on two bills that support conservation agricultural practices in Illinois, both of which passed. One resolution was in support of the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRs), and the other added soil health to enabling legislation of the Soil and Water Conservation Districts, making this officially part of their mission statement.



*Native prairie seeds like these are collected to be cleaned, dried, and distributed to farms for planting.*

### Increasing Biodiversity

We worked with farmers and landowners to promote and protect pollinators. This spring we installed plantings of native flowering plants on four farms, and we will work with two more farms this fall. Seeds gathered from these locations will be cleaned, dried, and distributed to farms and private landholdings that want to protect and increase biodiversity.

The work done to heal land in 2019 is evidence of the impact donations from our members has in Illinois. We did so much this year, and we cannot wait for the challenges, old and new, that we will face together in the years to come. //

The Martin Farm in Logan County played host to Illinois State Representative Tim Butler talking about healthy soil.



# Inspire Change

## 2019 Inspired Us All

Inspiring change is among the most difficult and challenging goals we undertook in 2019, yet as evidenced by the work we accomplished, change is what people want. From addressing climate change to the future of the renewable energy economy in Illinois, change took root across the state, in small towns to big cities.

### Clean Energy

The Clean Energy Jobs Act (CEJA) is legislation that will put Illinois on the path to 100% renewable energy by 2050, while fighting climate change and creating jobs and economic opportunity. PRN worked with the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition around the state to hold community conversations, town halls, and press conferences; gather petitions; issue action



alerts; and meet with legislators.

In May, we helped turn out more than 500 people to Clean Energy Lobby Day in Springfield to build support of CEJA and the Coal

Ash Pollution Prevention Act. If passed, CEJA will help create jobs and economic opportunities for economically disadvantaged and environmental justice communities, communities of color, and communities that will be impacted by a decline in fossil fuel use.

Solar for All is a new state program designed to bring the benefits of solar energy to low income communities by providing guaranteed savings to low income households and agencies that serve them. PRN is working to ensure that Solar for All delivers on its promises while educating eligible Champaign-Urbana communities on the benefits of the program.



PRN's Kim Knowles held community education sessions for Champaign-Urbana households and area nonprofits that serve low income communities.



### IDEA Farm Network

We are a proud partner in the IDEA Farm Network (IFN). The IFN began in February 2017 with about 45 farmers

learning about different practices, ways to build soil health, protect water, and increase diversity on farmlands. Today, over 425 farmers participate in the online discussion group, where they learn from each other and build lasting relationships. This year, we will expand the reach of the IFN to West-Central Illinois, Northeastern Illinois, and Southern Illinois.

### Stories from the Floodplain

This year, PRN released the first stories in a podcast series entitled *Stories from the Floodplain*. New staff member Ryan Grosso has an innate knack for telling compelling stories, and we intend to enlist him for additional episodes focusing on the equity and environmental justice implications of some of our country's flood control policies.



### 2019 Run for Wildlife

PRN's Run for Wildlife team ran 230.2 miles in 45 hours, 42 minutes, and 15 seconds! Even more exciting is that our runners and walkers raised over \$8,450. That is amazing! We cannot thank them enough for the time, effort, and training they put into protecting wildlife.

We have not solved all our problems, and we do not have all the answers to some of our most pressing issues. But 2019 will be remembered for the coalitions who worked together for larger goals. It will be remembered for the people from all walks of life who supported our work and took inspiration to make change happen in hometowns, in Springfield, and across Illinois. //



Thousands marched in September for the Global Climate Strike





# Annual Dinner Wrap-Up

This year's annual dinner was a resounding success! Over 335 people attended the event in Champaign to celebrate our award winners, to hear from an outspoken keynote speaker on the dangers of industrial agriculture, and to enjoy the friendship and camaraderie that makes our annual dinner the environmental event of the year in Illinois. With generous donations and pledges from our members, we raised nearly \$100,000! Your outpouring of support was incredible. Thank you for giving!

The evening opened with our cocktail reception and silent auction before moving into the Illinois Ballroom for the dinner and award presentations. Past PRN Executive Director Jean Flemma welcomed everyone and introduced current Executive Director Elliot Brinkman who spoke about his early connection with nature and the Kankakee River. He also highlighted PRN's many accomplishments from 2019 (which you can find on pages 3 - 5).

This year's **Volunteer of the Year Award** went to Grace and Randy Madding, two people who have done much to protect biodiversity and pollinators and in helping PRN expand our pollinator program. PRN Habitat and Agriculture Programs Specialist Kim Erndt-Pitcher presented the award.

This year's **Outstanding Public Servant Award** went to State Senator Scott Bennett, State Representative Carol Ammons, and State Representative Mike Marron (pictured second from right) for their work to pass the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention



Act which became law in July. PRN Water Resources Engineer Andrew Rehn introduced the award winners. The **River Steward of the Year** can be found on page 7.

Lastly, PRN member Debbie Campbell told us why she was inspired to give to PRN, and attendees took it to heart. Your generous gifts will help us protect water, heal land, and inspire change in 2020. We are so grateful for your continued commitment to PRN and the work we do. Thank you for being a member, and thank you for giving this year! //

## 2019 Annual Dinner Photos!

Check out the photos from this year's Annual Dinner at:  
[prairierivers.org/dinner](http://prairierivers.org/dinner)

Thank you to PRN member and photographer Eric Adickes for capturing the event again this year!



## THE NETWORK

Last edition we asked you to take action on the Clean Energy Jobs Act (CEJA). Thank you to all those who have already written Governor Pritzker and your Illinois State Senator and State Representative in Springfield.

CEJA is important legislation that will tackle climate change and pollution while promoting jobs and economic opportunity. 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.

Support CEJA at [prairierivers.org/ceja](http://prairierivers.org/ceja).



## Save the Date!

Mark your calendars for next year's Annual Dinner!

### October 23rd, 2020

I Hotel and Conference Center  
Champaign

## See you there!

# TAKES ACTION!

This year, our team members raised \$8,445 in the Run for Wildlife campaign. As we gear up for the 2020 Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon next April, we want to thank all of our runners/walkers for their dedication. We also want to thank you, too!

Each year, our members and supporters donate their time to collect signatures for petitions and write letters to legislators. You spend hours entering data so PRN staff can go to Springfield for meetings with the Illinois EPA or to field days with legislators to show them how important soil health is to wildlife and to our water. You spent time searching for silent auction items to help PRN make our annual dinner a stupendous success.

It is you that puts the network in PRN, and for that we are eternally grateful!



## River Steward Award

### Fred Newport

This year's **River Steward Award** goes to a tireless kayaker who was first nominated in 2018 and again this year for his volunteer stewardship of Homer Lake. This year's nomination comes from Champaign County Forest Preserve District and whose words we have edited for this article.



Fred Newport has always been an athlete at his core. As a competitive swimmer and collegiate level diving coach, Newport has always been connected to water. When nagging injuries kept him from staying healthy, he turned to kayaking and Homer Lake. Fortunately, for the Champaign County Forest Preserve District (CCFPD) and the Champaign Park District, Newport's journey to find health through outdoor recreation resulted in a healthier ecosystem at Homer Lake Forest Preserve and Kaufman Lake.

Newport kayaked at Homer Lake 120+ days last year and has spent countless hours at Kaufman Lake as well. He is a founding member of the Homer Lake steward program. He has fished trash out of the lake, removed shoreline invasive species, and documented wildlife he sees with photos.

Recently, his efforts have expanded. In fall of 2018, Fred and his wife, Sandy Lu joined a CCFPD Middle Fork River clean up at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. They were an integral part of a volunteer group who pulled over 1,000 lbs of televisions, tires, bottles, and other trash out of a 2.25 mile stretch of the river. Additionally, Fred has removed acres of invasive honeysuckle from the shoreline of Homer Lake and at Kaufman Lake.

Few volunteers have done more than Fred Newport to protect the water resources of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District and Champaign Park District. Because of his work, countless pounds of trash have been removed from Homer and Kaufman Lakes. Because of Newport's desire to live a healthy lifestyle, we can all envision a healthier watershed and a healthier tomorrow. //

## What We Accomplished! (continued)



**Andrew Rehn**

This year has changed the landscape of the coal ash problem in Illinois. A year ago, no one would have guessed that we'd have coal ash legislation and new rules being drafted. I'm proud to be part of the team making that important change happen.



**Sarah Scott**

I am very proud that we had a sold-out crowd at the Wild & Scenic Film Festival in Champaign. The films were so inspirational, and it's always a joy to get together with our members and friends! //

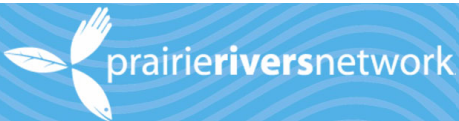


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