

# prairie rivers network

2020-2024 STRATEGIC PLAN



# PROTECT WATER. HEAL LAND. INSPIRE CHANGE.



As the year 2020 dawns planet Earth exists in a state of crisis, in its capacity to sustain human flourishing and the full diversity of life.

Over the past several years, there has been an unprecedented war on environmental protection at the federal level, including campaigns to undermine the nation's early, inadequate efforts to address climate change. Meanwhile, Illinois agencies charged with protecting land, waters, and wildlife have suffered major declines in budget, staff, and effectiveness.

We must ensure that our strategy reflects the scale of these crises, and it is in this context that Prairie Rivers Network unfolds and implements its ambitious **2020-2024 Strategic Plan.**



# OUR MISSION.

At **Prairie Rivers Network**, we protect water, heal land, and inspire change.

Using the creative power of science, law, and collective action, we join with people to protect and restore our rivers, to return healthy soils and diverse wildlife to our lands, and to transform how we care for the earth and for each other.





# PROTECT WATER.

Water is life—connecting, sustaining,  
and inspiring us all.

At Prairie Rivers Network, we protect water from  
the ravages of pollution and restore the beauty  
and power of naturally flowing rivers. We hold  
polluters accountable, advance policies to allow  
river ecosystems to thrive, and promote practices  
that keep our waters clean and abundant.





# HEAL LAND.

Land and water form a system on which the entire community of life depends; to care for land is to care for water. Too often, human activity degrades land and water and imperils this community.

At Prairie Rivers Network, we advance practices and policies that return health to our soils and increase biodiversity. We work with people to restore the lands along and between our rivers, repair the earth that provides our food, and ensure that animals have the habitat needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.





# INSPIRE CHANGE.

We are part of an interconnected whole. Our community includes all parts of the Earth: soil, water, people, plants, and animals.

At Prairie Rivers Network, we elevate and uphold the cultural values and understandings needed for all life to flourish. We use the images and voices of people to tell compelling stories of resistance and renewal. We educate and empower people to act. And we lead collective efforts to create new ways of restoring our rivers, healing our lands, and caring for our neighbors.





## PART ONE:

# STRATEGIC PROGRAMS

Prairie Rivers Network advances its mission through a diversity of strategic programs. Our programs confront many of the root causes of environmental degradation in our state while addressing the sources and impacts of climate change. In doing so, they nurture ecologically-grounded cultural values and understandings that uphold the entire community of life. Here we organize our programs into three areas: agriculture; energy; and river and wildlife habitat. Work in each program area tends to promote all three parts of our overall mission. Concluding comments introduce emerging initiatives.

**In the case of each program area we provide:**

- 1. Background**
- 2. Program goals**
- 3. Key actions to achieve the goals**
- 4. Potential evaluation criteria**
- 5. Core competencies we possess to advance the work**



# AGRICULTURE

With a majority of Illinois lands in row crops, agriculture is a primary driver of water quality, soil health, wildlife habitat (both abundance and quality), and rural community health. Sadly, these effects are quite often negative, particularly in the case of conventional, industrial-style grain and livestock production. Reshaping agriculture is essential to the renewed health of Illinois lands, waters, and wildlife, and to the long-term welfare of its people.

A shift away from the chemically-intensive and highly disruptive form of conventional agriculture toward regenerative farming is also critically important if we are to decrease carbon emissions and create a climate change-resilient food system. For these changes to occur, Illinois residents need to awaken to the high costs and bleak long-term prospects of conventional, industrial-style production. They need to see that today's farm outputs vastly exceed levels needed to feed us; we need not exploit our lands and waters so ruthlessly. They need to recognize that the current industrial system, far different from farming of prior generations, chiefly benefits global corporations at the expense of Illinois lands and waters, farmers and rural communities, taxpayers, and public health.





# PROGRAM GOALS

**1** Regenerative agriculture is an economically viable alternative to industrial agriculture, occupying a growing share of the overall Illinois landscape.

## KEY ACTIONS:

- Work with farmers and agricultural purchasers to promote the benefits of regenerative agricultural systems that improve soil health and water quality, and capture carbon
- Promote and protect pollinator habitat
- Develop and implement certification programs for conservation farmers that are based on rigorous metrics and reflect real water quality improvements
- Push major agricultural purchasers to develop programs to buy from certified farmers, and to market new “conservation certified” products
- Reform tax, land-use, environmental, and farm-subsidy policies to reduce the unfair economic advantages enjoyed by conventional industrial production methods

**2** Industrial agriculture is held accountable for its many harms—to waterways, lands, wildlife, the atmosphere, public health, and rural life—with its costs internalized by the industry and, over time, greatly reduced.

## KEY ACTIONS:

- Develop broad coalition of stakeholders to advance policies to reduce nutrient pollution
- Educate the public and local leaders about nutrient pollution as a drinking water and public health problem
- Leverage IL Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy to spotlight industrial agriculture’s role in polluting streams and rivers, and to find solutions to reduce nutrient loadings in our waters
- Strengthen Illinois’ laws on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) siting, permitting, and pollution
- Curb use of and strengthen regulations on dangerous herbicides and pesticides
- Develop and distribute myth busting information on agriculture in Illinois, targeting key NGO staff, journalists, and government officials; develop and implement a rapid response communications team to challenge the biased media narrative surrounding farming in America
- Promote a recognition that lax pollution standards unwisely subsidize destructive practices, undercut healthier farming practices, and impose high costs on public water suppliers and taxpayers
- Promote a nature-respecting view of responsible land ownership

# POTENTIAL EVALUATIONS AND METRICS

- Number of farmers adopting regenerative practices and amount of acreage in regenerative agriculture
- Nutrient loading in Illinois rivers and streams
- Number/strength of laws/regulations passed that address nutrient pollution
- Breadth of coalition involved in working to reduce nutrient pollution
- Number of farmers participating in certification programs
- Quantities of certified crops purchased/sold into “certification market”
- Amount of off-target damage from herbicides and pesticides
- Acreage of pollinator habitat in state

# CORE COMPETENCIES

Prairie Rivers Network has, in recent years, developed strong relationships with farm owners and operators, particularly those engaged in regenerative farming. Our geographic location, with our headquarters in central Illinois, places us at the heart of the conversation on how we should farm and on farming’s vast impacts on communities and the environment.

Our long-standing focus on water quality personalizes and localizes the issue of ag pollution, allowing us to engage more people in a broader coalition. In recent years, we have added greater expertise on farm pesticides. Our grounding in science provides legitimacy to all of our work and statements around reforming agriculture.





# ENERGY

We are now in the midst of a climate emergency that requires a complete transformation of our energy system to one powered by clean and renewable sources. To ensure this transformation is a just and equitable one, we must also clean up and correct the tainted legacies of our fossil-fuel dominated system—namely, pollution, a warming planet, unemployment, lagging wages, and community disinvestment. As dire as the climate situation is, we have the opportunity for Illinois communities and wildlife to thrive if we clean up legacy waste and transition to systems that are not only clean and renewable, but socially just as well.





# PROGRAM GOALS

**1** Goal: Lands, waters, and wildlife are protected from the environmental harms of energy production.

## KEY ACTIONS:

- Require owners of fossil fuel infrastructure to properly clean up wastes from fossil fuel extraction, processing, and power production
- Strengthen regulation and enforcement of discharges to surface and groundwater from fossil fuel infrastructure
- Deter investment in new fossil fuel infrastructure
- Support environmentally sound programs for renewables including robust recycling of renewable components, responsible mineral sourcing, and siting that protects and enhances biodiversity
- Support reforms to federal biofuels policies to eliminate reliance on annual crops like corn and soy

**2** Climate change is mitigated by a just and equitable transition to renewable energy.

## KEY ACTIONS:

- Advocate for sufficient funding to allow Illinois to meet Renewable Portfolio Standard goals (e.g., 100% renewable energy by 2050)
- Organize support for policies that decarbonize Illinois' electricity sector by 2030
- Ensure just transition policies and programs are adequate and responsive to frontline fossil fuel community needs through engaging those communities
- Aid traditionally underserved communities through expanded access to energy efficiency programs, low-income solar incentives, workforce and business development efforts, and reformed electric rate structure
- Support beneficial electrification and the electrification of state and municipal fleets
- Incentivize smart technologies and energy storage

# POTENTIAL EVALUATIONS AND METRICS

- Reduction in fossil fuel energy produced
- Percentage of energy obtained from renewable sources
- Renewable energy jobs created
- Strength of rules for closing and remediating coal ash sites, including resources available for remediation and reclamation
- Coal ash sites effectively remediated
- Funding available for closure/remediation
- Low-income solar projects completed

# CORE COMPETENCIES

Prairie Rivers Network is a proven leader in policy development and grassroots organizing and education, and is well-positioned to advance decarbonization, equitable clean energy policies, and just transition programs. We serve as a convener of diverse stakeholders, and have longstanding partnerships with others working in the field. This puts us in a prime position to assist in fulfilling our societal obligation to transition these communities from being fossil fuel dependent to leaders in the clean energy economy.

We have had significant recent successes in addressing legacy coal ash waste, and there remains an opportunity to build on these successes. Water pollution is a deeply personal, local issue, and our focus on ending water pollution provides a tangible, relatable, and “in the backyard” platform to address dirty energy and force the internalization of costs on the fossil fuel industry.





## RIVERS & WILDLIFE

We are now facing a wildlife and biodiversity crisis, driven largely by loss of habitat, which will be amplified and exacerbated by climate change. Climate change will also bring increased flooding, exposing the most vulnerable communities to even greater risk. Meanwhile, more frequent and prolonged droughts will degrade rivers, damage aquatic life, threaten drinking water supplies, and likely lead to expanded farm irrigation that exacerbates the depletion of aquifers and headwater streams. Our rivers and headwater streams have been degraded from pollution and decades of poor management, yet they supply the lifeblood for a renewed Illinois landscape with healthy wildlife populations.

We will promote wildlife habitat conservation efforts throughout the state, including in urban areas and in and among working lands. We will restore and expand funding of our state agencies and take seriously their role as trustees with duties to protect and support wildlife and habitat. We will prepare for a warming world—which will put great stress on both humans and wildlife—by restoring and reinforcing healthier, more resilient natural systems.





# PROGRAM GOALS

**1** Illinois has more abundant and higher quality habitat and open space to support human, plant, and animal communities.

## KEY ACTIONS:

- Establish and protect contiguous habitats that allow for the uninterrupted movement of plants and wildlife—north-south riparian corridors will be critical migration routes for climate adaptation
- Increase state and federal funding for land conservation
- Promote policies that enhance biodiversity on public and private lands
- Promote changes to tax and land use policies to foster or demand better behavior by private landowners
- Curb use of and strengthen regulations on dangerous herbicides and pesticides
- Defend and strengthen endangered species protections

**2** Our rivers and the communities along them are healthier and more resilient.

## KEY ACTIONS:

- Reform laws and policies governing levee districts and drainage districts to support floodplain reconnection and headwater stream restoration
- Educate the public and decision-makers about the benefits of natural river, wetland, and floodplain functions
- Advocate for the funding of restoration programs that establish healthy aquatic and riparian habitats along rivers and streams
- Assess social vulnerability related to flood risk management policy
- Advocate for policies to prevent the transfer of any and all aquatic invasive species between water systems
- Advance reforms to Illinois water use law that protect groundwater supplies, aquifers, and ecologically healthy in-stream flows, particularly from expanded irrigation

# POTENTIAL EVALUATIONS AND METRICS

- Funding available for river restoration and land conservation
- Advancement of nature-based solutions along rivers and streams (e.g., floodplain reconnection and restoration projects initiated and/or completed)
- Acres of wildlife habitat restored
- Policies created or updated to support river and community health (e.g., river management, flood risk, flood insurance)

# CORE COMPETENCIES

With our long history as a river-focused organization, we are well-positioned to advocate for wildlife habitat along river corridors, which are likely our best opportunities for quality habitat in the highly-altered landscape of Illinois. We are also at the center of the conversation around reforming agriculture, which has driven the destruction and degradation of habitat in Illinois, and is a major driver of both water pollution and the use of our rivers for industrial shipping purposes.

Throughout our organization’s history, we have established key partnerships in these areas and have a demonstrable record of success. We have been leaders in river and land conservation throughout the state. Our focus on policy, and our work at the state, regional, and national levels also positions us well to affect change at a broad scale.





# FUTURE PROGRAM NEEDS

Within our strategic planning process, we have identified several areas that will need to be addressed in the near future. Part of making strategic planning a living process is to set up an internal means of strategic assessment for these areas.

We will continue to explore and evaluate:

1. How new programs and initiatives fit into our organization's mission
2. Opportunities and impediments
3. Relevant partners and stakeholders
4. Funding and staffing
5. Prospects and likelihood of success







## PART TWO:

# BUILDING CAPACITY

In order to achieve our goals to protect water, heal land, and inspire change in the face of growing climate and biodiversity crises, Prairie Rivers Network will need to build our capacity.

Over the next five years, PRN will expand and diversify our membership and funding sources in order to grow our annual operating budget. We will enhance board effectiveness and build staff capabilities.

To strengthen our organization, we seek to achieve six goals:

1. Expand staff capacity for rapid response and emerging issues
2. Increase funding from non-grant sources
3. Diversify and grow membership statewide
4. Fully incorporate principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in our organization and its work
5. Enhance organizational effectiveness through improvements in staff structure, capabilities, culture, and internal operations
6. Enhance board effectiveness in guiding and promoting Prairie Rivers Network



# GOALS

## 1 Expand staff capacity for rapid response and emerging issues.

A key component of expanding our membership and growing our budget is to work on issues that people care deeply about and communicate our successes on those issues. We need to have knowledgeable staff available to respond to emerging issues and engage members and volunteers.

By 2024, we would like to expand our ability to respond to site-specific emergency issues as they arise, and activate our membership and the general public.

### KEY ACTIONS:

- Develop and have in place action plans for common emergencies like fish kills, algal blooms, flooding, pesticide drift, and deforestation
- Develop strong relationships with reporters and media outlets so we are viewed as a resource when issues arise
- Improve ability to host and utilize volunteers and interns to support campaigns and boots-on-the-ground activities

## 2 Increase funding from non-grant sources.

Currently, grant funding comprises 74% of our annual operating budget, with donations making up only 22%. The vast majority of our donations come from major donors giving \$250 or more. A larger portion of our budget needs to come from unrestricted donations, so PRN remains resilient during economic downturns, and has the ability to develop or expand programs that are not currently funded.

By 2024, we would like to increase our donation support to comprise one-third of our annual revenue.

### KEY ACTIONS:

- Develop and implement a robust Individual Major Donor Cultivation Plan
- Expand business partnerships
- Grow the PRN Endowment

# GOALS

## 3 Diversify and grow membership statewide.

Prairie Rivers Network currently has a solid membership base of 1,250+ people, with an excellent 2-year retention rate averaging 72%. We have a strong membership and fundraising plan consisting of two major fundraising events each year, in addition to regular fundraising activities throughout the year (e.g., engaging online and in-person interactions with members). We strive to make donating easy and rewarding by offering a variety of online donation channels, providing both paper and electronic renewals, and promptly and frequently thanking donors throughout the year.

By 2024, we would like to grow our membership to 2,500 and diversify our membership.

### KEY ACTIONS:

- Transform public perception and values, linking human well-being and happiness to nature's health and diversity
- Educate and empower people to stand up for their local lands, waters, and wildlife
- Develop and implement creative membership campaigns
- Develop a membership diversity plan
- Provide engaging member experiences and connect people with nature

## 4 Fully incorporate principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in our organization and its work.

We believe that clean water and a healthy environment are fundamental rights. To ensure that our work to protect the environment serves everyone, as the Illinois Constitution guarantees, Prairie Rivers Network must make a more serious and intentional commitment to issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. This will require us to assess our understanding and ability to incorporate these principles into all aspects of our organization, including: board development, hiring, communications, membership development, and the planning and implementation of program work.

In 2020, we will initiate a learning process for staff and board to better incorporate principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice into our organization's operations and work.

### KEY ACTIONS:

- Conduct an assessment to review our organization's competency with issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice
- Provide learning and training opportunities for staff and board to increase literacy in these concepts
- Complete an organizational planning process to incorporate these principles into all aspects of operations and programming



# GOALS

**5** Enhance organizational effectiveness through improvements in staff structure, capabilities, culture, and internal operations .

Prairie Rivers Network endeavors to attract and retain excellent staff, be competitive in the market, and be fair and equitable in our hiring and employment practices. We seek to build and foster leadership within our staff to contribute to a culture of collaboration, thoughtfulness, accountability, inclusivity, and mission-driven focus.

To continue to have strong, motivated leaders, we seek to recognize and celebrate our staff with a strong, comprehensive benefits package, transparent administration, and happy and engaging work environment.

By the end of 2020, we will review our personnel policies and review our organizational structure.

**KEY ACTIONS:**

- Develop and implement an internal structure of responsibility, oversight, and staff support suitable for a larger organization
- Promote a team-oriented, collaborative culture that energizes staff, makes best use of their talents, and fully recognizes their contributions
- Provide enhanced opportunities for staff training and pathways for advancement
- Support all staff with competitive benefit packages and progressive personnel policies

**6** Enhance board effectiveness in guiding and promoting Prairie Rivers Network.

Prairie Rivers Network believes good governance and accountability practices provide safeguards to ensure that our assets are used consistently, lawfully, and ethically within the organization's stated mission and tax-exempt purpose. In addition, Prairie Rivers Network strives for transparency to our members and supporters with regard to its operations, finances, fundraising practices, and use of assets.

By the end of 2020, we will review our board governance policies, by-laws, and improve governance to ensure continued adherence to best practices.

**KEY ACTIONS:**

- Develop a board culture and internal structure tailored to the needs of a larger, growing organization
- Recruit and retain diverse leadership within our board
- Expand board involvement in outreach activities for organizational promotion and advancement





# PROTECT WATER. HEAL LAND. INSPIRE CHANGE.



At Prairie Rivers Network, we protect and restore our rivers. We return healthy soils and diverse wildlife to our lands. We transform how we care for the earth—and each other.

Our strategy must reflect the scale of our crisis. So we're ambitious, passionate, and vocal about all we do. We educate, empower, and encourage people to act. We give voice to those who have compelling stories of resistance and renewal. And we partner with people and organizations who know—and implement—what it takes for all life to flourish.

As we move into the future,  
we can make an impact together.

## PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK



## GET INVOLVED

Together we can make a difference.

Visit our website for more information.

**PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG**

