



A Movement to Meet the Moment

Robert Hirschfeld

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has launched an all out war on the environment. They are ignoring the climate crisis, promoting drilling and mining near treasured natural areas and vulnerable communities, imperiling endangered species, approving pesticides that harm children, abandoning streams to pollution, and the list goes on and on...

And all of this is happening while a pandemic rages across the country and as communities around the US rise up to protest racial injustice. Are there connections between all these events playing out in 2020? Absolutely.

2020 has been a year of awakenings. We are waking to the fact that all things are connected—an idea nature is happy to teach us if we pay attention. As an environmental group we should be keenly aware of this, but for too long, we've stayed apart from and silent on issues deemed not to be

“environmental.” Every major crisis we face right now—the COVID pandemic, racial inequality, pollution, climate change, community health and well being—all form a complex, interrelated web.

At the same moment that EPA is gutting environmental protections, people are taking to the streets to demand racial justice. And part of that demand must include an end to environmental racism. The call to dismantle white supremacy is parallel with and harmonious to the call to dismantle the climate-destroying, neighborhood-polluting fossil fuel industry. To truly confront one issue is to confront the other.

George Floyd’s desperate plea of “I can’t breathe” resonated and reverberated throughout the US. It became a rallying cry at protests in the wake of his death under the knee of police. And it’s not hard to see why - people of color suffocate under the weight of centuries of oppression. This goes beyond police brutality and violence. Black Americans disproportionately suffer the consequences of pollution and environmental harm, resulting in higher rates of illness and shortened lives.

As NWF’s Mustafa Santiago Ali told Congress in July, “When we say, ‘I can’t breathe,’ we literally can’t breathe.”

And here’s one more connection—the people bearing the brunt of the worst air pollution in America are being hit hardest by a pandemic that attacks the respiratory system. This is no coincidence. This is the logical outcome of a system that devalues Black lives.

The environmental movement has a checkered past when it comes to race. Among some early leaders, racism and segregation were features, not bugs. And though gains have been made, we are still far from where we should be. But however flawed its founders, one thing is clear—the movement IS changing. More than ever, it’s about how lives matter. Lives matter more than profits. Lives matter more than industry’s “right” to pollute air and water. But all lives cannot matter unless Black lives matter.

PRN is fighting back against the assault on the environment. This spring we filed suit on behalf of our rivers to restore the full protections of the Clean Water Act. And we are determined to make the fight against environmental racism a cornerstone of our work going forward. There’s no other choice. These fights are one and the same.

IN THIS ISSUE

DIRECTOR’S NOTES.....2
PROTECT WATER.....3
HEAL LAND.....4
INSPIRE CHANGE.....5
ANNUAL DINNER.....6
THE DISMANTLING OF NEPA7

DIRECTOR'S NOTES



Elliot Brinkman

I hope this edition of the Prairie Rivers Network newsletter finds you well. I mean that, sincerely.

During these difficult and uncertain times, simple pleasantries like “finds you well” or “take care” suddenly have more weight to them. They take on a whole new meaning, and for good reason. We find ourselves in the midst of complex and interconnected crises—a global pandemic, systemic racial oppression, and the dismantling of bedrock environmental protections at a time when we need those protections the most. Frankly, *it's a lot*.

Times like these can offer moments of clarity, highlighting the importance of caring for ourselves and caring for others. In that spirit, I hope you're finding some things that bring you joy and help you recharge. For my family and I, that means spending time outside, going on walks around the neighborhood, playing in the garden, and having meals together. Simple things like these can be restorative and help us bring our best selves forward, which is more important than ever.

To care for each other, we all have to rise to the occasion in our own way. For Prairie Rivers Network, that means continuing to fight for clean water, healthy land, and communities free from pollution. We certainly have a lot of work to do, which requires our steadfast and sustained commitment. Hopefully that commitment comes through in these pages as you read about our efforts to fight federal environmental rollbacks, protect water quality and biodiversity in rural landscapes, advocate for equitable energy policy, and much more.

I'm continually humbled by the persistence of our staff, board, and community of support, even in the face of great uncertainty and change. So please, take care, and in doing so we can continue to meet this moment. //

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 I GIVE

I have always been drawn to streams and rivers. I fish, wade, and just hike along them. From the herons and kingfishers that fly above them to the freshwater mussels that burrow in their sediments, rivers and



Bob Szafoni

streams support a wide and increasingly imperiled variety of Illinois' biodiversity.

Additionally, I have spent over 30 years in the protection of Illinois' biodiversity. The protection of rivers and the life they support does not lend itself to standard conservation practices—it takes a watershed, literally and figuratively. Prairie Rivers Network recognizes that challenge and is an effective advocate for river conservation across the wide variety of disciplines and interest groups necessary to affect meaningful change.

I have been a member of PRN for over 20 years, and I look forward to continuing my support of the organization for Illinois' rivers and all that depends on healthy flowing waters. I do so with optimism and hope, and confidence that PRN will be there to stand up for what I cherish.

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Protect Water

Testing Rural Wells for Nitrate

The lack of information on nitrate levels in Illinois rural wells makes it harder for residents to make decisions about their water. It is therefore important that people know how to test their water themselves. To educate Illinois residents about the need to regularly test their water for nitrate and to gather more firsthand information about the state of rural groundwater in Illinois, Prairie Rivers Network is providing nitrate test kits to rural well owners.

Nitrogen and phosphorus running off our farm fields and from water treatment plants degrades the waters we depend on for business, recreation, and drinking. Each year these nutrients, mainly phosphorus and nitrogen, flow down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico where they cause the second largest dead zone in the world. At the same time, harmful algal blooms are becoming a more common occurrence. And each year, more of our drinking water sources get dangerously close to exceeding the safe drinking standard for nitrate.

While nutrient pollution in our water causes a broad range of issues for commerce, recreation, and the water we drink, we track some of the harms better than others. There is plentiful monitoring of the Gulf hypoxic zone. Each year the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration sends a ship out to measure exactly how large the dead zone is that year. We also monitor the phosphorus and nitrogen levels in the water that flows from our state down the Mississippi River.



For those on public drinking water, their utilities regularly test the water for a wide

array of contaminants including nitrate. On the other hand, we have very little scientific information on the prevalence of harmful algal blooms and nitrate contamination of private wells, even as we see more frequent reports in the news and more comprehensive reports being produced by neighboring states.

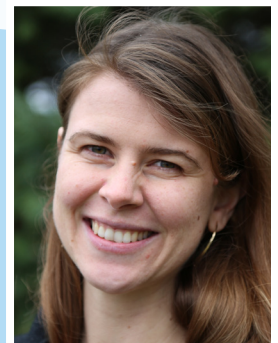
While we don't have enough information on nitrate levels reaching private well owners in general, it is especially important for those with shallow rural wells, or wells that are less than 50ft deep, to monitor their water's nitrate level. Generally we think that groundwater nitrate levels would be more consistent than levels in surface water which tend to fluctuate with crop fertilizer uptake. However, shallow wells often act differently from deeper wells because by being closer to the surface they are often more connected to the surface water. We have learned from looking at public water records that it is not just surface water where nitrate levels are rising. Many systems that depend on groundwater are also rising to the point of needing treatment when they surpass the safe drinking water standard of 10 mg/L nitrate-n.

Nationally, the U.S. EPA has determined that approximately 20% of shallow rural wells (here defined as less than 100 ft.) are over the safe drinking water standard. To compare to other Midwest states, Iowa found that 18% of their rural wells were over the safe drinking standard, and 35% of shallow wells (less than 50 ft) had exceeded it. However, there is limited information on Illinois' rural well water. In the 1990s, the Illinois State Water Survey performed a pilot study that tested wells in five counties and found that in some counties

Continued on Page 6



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



Heal Land

Drifting Toward Disaster

Millions of acres of crops have been injured by dicamba since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved new formulations of the herbicide for use over the top of soybeans and cotton. Over the past two years, through our Tree and Plant Health Monitoring Program, we have exposed how injuries don't stop at the field edge—symptoms of herbicide drift can be seen in trees and plants throughout small rural towns, on both public and private property. The social injuries have been just as widespread, creating anger and strife in agricultural communities, with many specialty growers distressed about losing their way of life. Volatilized dicamba knows no boundaries and does not obey property lines. Yet the EPA continues to allow its use.

This scenario is fundamentally incompatible with our vision of a resilient and vibrant food system that not only supports farming families, but whole communities—a food system that produces healthy food while protecting our air, water, land, and wildlife. We cannot have healthy land, food, or people if we are recklessly spraying poison across the landscape.

To address this, PRN, working in partnership with National Wildlife Federation and the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, has developed a report on the problems with dicamba, detailing how its use over large swaths of U.S. farmland threatens conservation efforts and biodiversity throughout much of our country. *Drifting Towards Disaster: How Dicamba Herbicides are Harming Cultivated and Wild Landscapes* highlights the struggles farmers of all types face: from those who remain stuck on a chemical weed control treadmill, to those who fear losing their multi-generational



family farms due to this volatile herbicide.

The report explains how we got to this place—in a chemical war of attrition against weeds due to our over-reliance on herbicides. It also raises important questions regarding the impacts of widespread use of these volatile herbicides on tens of millions of acres of US farmland. Additionally, we offer clear recommendations that will protect ecosystems, communities, and the farms that grow the food we depend on.

Industry is still pushing for the continued use of dicamba for the 2021 growing season, despite this summer's 9th Circuit Court ruling which terminated the licenses for the herbicide on June 3, as well as multiple court rulings compensating farmers for crop losses due to drift. Once again, we have submitted comments to EPA requesting that the licenses for these new in-crop formulations of dicamba be denied. We've also submitted our reports, but we need our voice to be louder. It is time for the EPA and other state and federal agencies to do their job and start protecting more than just the interests of industry. Every voice helps; every comment makes us stronger. If you would like to send your own comments to EPA telling them not to renew the licenses for these dicamba products for the 2021 growing season, you can find a comment submission form at <http://prairierivers.org/take-action>. Tell the EPA to deny requests to re-register this harmful herbicide. Tell the EPA to protect our environment and everyone's right to a healthier, more sustainable food system.

For more information about our monitoring program and to read our summary of the 2018-2019 monitoring seasons, visit www.prairierivers.org/monitoring. You can read our report *Drifting Toward Disaster* at <https://bit.ly/2XNCc75> for an in-depth view of the issue. //

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



Inspire Change

Illinois Solar for All

Prairie Rivers Network Launches Community Education Campaign

The Future Energy Jobs Act of 2016 (FEJA) ushered in Illinois' first low income solar program, creating opportunities for qualifying households and organizations to obtain the benefits of solar. To date, residential solar has been concentrated among high-income households allowing them to disproportionately benefit from publicly funded incentives. Illinois Solar for All (ISFA) seeks to promote more equitable access by creating incentives for developers to build solar projects for low income households and the nonprofit and public agencies that serve them. Low income is defined as 80% or less of median household income and thus is determined by place of residence and the size of the household.

More Equitable Access

Illinois' Solar for All program operates through three subprograms: (1) Distributed Generation (DG), (2) Nonprofit/Public Facilities (NPPF) and (3) Community Solar. The DG subprogram incentivizes projects for low income single and multi-family residential properties, while the NPPF subprogram is available to nonprofits and public agencies that are located within low income neighborhoods and that provide critical services to those communities. Finally, Solar for All community solar is available for households that are unable to house a solar project on their residences. Community solar projects may be located on rooftops or be ground based and operate through the sale of subscriptions. Participants purchase subscriptions to solar panels in the community solar project, and the number of panels in a subscription is determined by the households' energy usage.

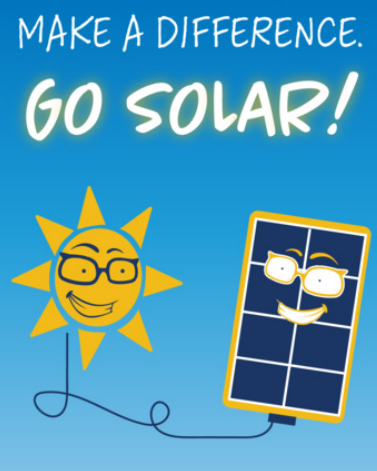
Benefits for Low Income Communities

One of the beauties of ISFA is that it prohibits solar developers from charging any upfront costs or fees to participants in the



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.

Sources:
<https://www.aceee.org/research-report/u1602>
<https://www.lowincomesolar.org/why-act/>
<https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy18osti/70901.pdf>



DG and community solar subprograms while also requiring guaranteed savings on

electricity charges. Nationally, low income households spend a larger portion of their income on home energy costs than other households. This measure is referred to as a household's "energy burden." High energy burdens are often the result of improperly heated or cooled homes, which can greatly affect the mental and physical health of families through increased financial stress, as well as respiratory, heart, and other diseases.

Solar programs like ISFA offer a compelling opportunity for reducing the energy burden of low income households whether via a rooftop DG system or subscription to a community solar project, particularly if paired with household energy efficiency upgrades. A community solar project located at the City of Urbana landfill has been approved for ISFA incentives and will serve between 500 and 730 households.

Likewise, the nonprofit/public facility subprogram permits nonprofits and public agencies in low income communities to spend less on electricity, allowing them to direct more funds to critical community services. Several nonprofits in Champaign-Urbana have been awarded ISFA projects. Among them are Cunningham Children's Home, Crisis Nursery, Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance, Developmental Services Center, and Don Moyer Boys and Girls Club.

Environmental Justice

In addition to enhancing equitable access to solar, ISFA seeks to redress environmental injustices by setting aside a portion of program funding for projects located in environmental justice (EJ) communities. Environmental justice recognizes that communities of color and under-resourced communities are disproportionately exposed to pollution and its concomitant health effects. These communities also receive far less protection from our environmental laws and government programs than more affluent communities. An environmental justice community in Solar for All is one at higher risk of exposure to pollution based on a number of environmental and socioeconomic factors. The Cunningham Children's Home project received prioritization due to its location in an EJ community.

Continued on Page 7

Annual Dinner @Home!



For the last 20+ years, Prairie Rivers Network has hosted an annual dinner to celebrate our victories, look ahead to the challenges we face, hear from a distinguished keynote speaker, and visit with our members.

Instead of our usual face-to-face event, this year's dinner will look a little different. We are going virtual! Join us for a unique PRN Annual Dinner @Home! Enjoy our recap of the year's accomplishments, celebrate our award winners, and share a meal together from local farms/restaurants... all from the comfort of your own home!

Mark your calendar for our October 23rd online annual dinner event. Look for an invitation and emails in late September for details on how to join us virtually.

Call for River Steward Award Nominations

This year has been fraught with challenges, but it has not stopped people from doing good. This is your chance to nominate someone for this year's River Steward Award. This is our opportunity to recognize the selfless work of 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 conservation efforts to Sarah Scott at sscott@prairierivers.org. Nominations are due by September 4, 2020. //

Water from page 3

up to 40% of shallow rural wells were over the safe drinking water standard. Unfortunately, the full study was never funded.

In our first round of kits sent out this spring, we focused the project on outreach. We sent kits to 66 households across the state. In this round, most people did not have a shallow well, and only a few had higher nitrate levels. However, as nitrate levels seem to be rising across the board, it is important for rural well owners to continue to test their water annually as nitrate levels can change. We will offer the next round of test kits this winter through early spring. This time around, with the state opening up after COVID-19 restrictions, we plan to focus the project on reaching more residents with shallow rural wells. //

THANK YOU FOR

August has seen some important progress on issues you care about, and it is because of Prairie Rivers Network members who have taken action over the years that made the difference.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

On August 4, the president signed the Great American Outdoors Act (H.R. 1957), solidifying what is arguably the most important conservation legislation we've seen in decades. The Great American Outdoors Act will permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) while providing up to \$1.9 billion a year to address the backlog of essential maintenance at forests, wildlife refuges, and other public lands.

As the state affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation, PRN has made full funding for the LWCF a significant priority for many years to ensure that wildlife and people have access to healthy natural spaces.

Water Resources Development Act

Earlier this year, American Rivers named the Upper Mississippi River *America's Most Endangered River*® of 2020, citing

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from the
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TAKING ACTION

the grave threat that climate change and poor river and watershed management pose to public safety. The Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), recently passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, takes important steps to address these threats on the Upper Mississippi River.

“For the first time in a long time, the UMRR Program is getting a much-needed boost,” said Ryan Grosso of PRN. “It has a great record of success, and we hope these changes will continue that pattern and open doors to more critical habitat restoration projects.”

Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act

On the coal ash front, August saw an Illinois EPA hearing of expert testimony and public comment on the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act (SB9) rulemaking. SB9 became law last year and put us on a path to having strong protections for coal ash. The hearing took place over three days, with public comment by dozens of people, PRN members, and allies.

Thank you for taking action now and in years past as these wins could not have happened without you!

The Dismantling of NEPA

For more than 50 years, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has stood in the way of dangerous and damaging federal projects. While it's not always perfect or effective, the process of NEPA is fundamental to our understanding of how projects like bridges and pipelines affect the environment and the communities they're built in.

As the Natural Resources Defense Council simply puts it, “Before the government can take any major action, it needs to assess the impact of the project, inform the public of its plans, consider other options, and open up its proposal to public comment.”

Those sequential steps for federal agencies have been around for years, but on July 15th, the Trump administration finalized its plan to drastically change and undermine the core principles of NEPA.

Among other things, the administration's new rule includes provisions that:

- alter and limit the types of projects that can be reviewed under NEPA;
- change the type of environmental impacts considered for a project, all but eliminating the need to study how it could exacerbate climate change and other issues;
- shorten the deadline of some environmental reviews to no more than two years; and
- modify how people comment on proposed projects near their homes and families, severely limiting the ability of low-income communities and communities of color to oppose dangerous projects.

Fortunately, long legal battles are expected in the coming months to slow or completely halt the rule. Prairie River Network will continue to monitor where the rule stands and reach out to you, our members and supporters, if there is a way you can help us defend NEPA. //



Change from page 5

Prairie Rivers Network's Role in Solar for All

Because we believe in the importance and potential of this program, Prairie Rivers Network has been holding educational workshops with nonprofits and churches in CU, and we will expand this work around central Illinois. None of this would have been possible without the continued support of our members. PRN and our partners have successfully advocated for improvements to the program that advance access and equity, and we are hard at work lobbying for a

comprehensive energy bill that includes a threefold increase in the ISFA budget. In this time of economic uncertainty and loss, helping our neighbors through programs like ISFA takes on added urgency.//





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Now is the Time to Give!

These challenging times offer us a stark look at how our society responds to emergent crises. The political and social dynamics of this moment likely foretell what is to come as we tackle the ongoing climate crisis, environmental justice, and attacks on environmental protections.

At Prairie Rivers Network, our work has long focused on improving policy and protecting the health of people and the environment. If you can, please give today to help us protect water, heal land, and inspire change. Thank you!

Renew Your Membership!

