



## HEALTHY DEMOCRACY, HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT

### Ryan Grosso

This year has been historic for many reasons. And with November 3rd in our rear-view mirror, this election cycle was no different. More than 158 million people voted, many for the first time, and many voted early or by mail for their safety and that of others. Despite the baseless claims of voter fraud, the democratic process ensured that millions of Americans had their votes counted. Former vice-president Joe Biden is now president-elect of the United States.

As a non-profit organization, Prairie Rivers Network has never endorsed a candidate for elected office. As many of our members know, part of our work involves advocating for smart environmental policy at the state and federal level. These efforts do not stop when an election is decided.

Groups like ours across the country are looking ahead to the Biden-Harris administration with hopes of much-needed climate policy, regulations on emissions and dangerous pesticides, protection of natural spaces, support for environmental justice, and the list goes on.

We look forward to a new administration because of what has been missing and what has been damaged over the last four years. Leaders in Washington have undermined laws meant to protect the environment and our communities and have pushed our planet closer to the brink. And when these laws were threatened, you answered our calls to action when it was needed most. A new administration does not mean we let our guard down or stop our work, but it does give us hope for a new

direction, one that leads us towards a cleaner, healthier world.

On January 20th, we can expect the Biden administration to recommit the United States to the Paris Climate Agreement and adopt ambitious goals to cut emissions, to transition us to renewable energy, and to protect our land, water, and air.

We may also see the next administration correct the harm that has occurred over the last four years. The outgoing administration has imperiled our land and water to the benefit of polluters over that of public health. While the work of the Biden administration will take time, we hope it will address environmental racism and its impact on the frontline communities that bear the brunt of pollution in this country.

We are hopeful for the future, but we recognize that a change in administration will not solve our climate crisis overnight. The most important question is: What will we do to help create the change we need?



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## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

### ELLIOT BRINKMAN

As we wrap up 2020 and look forward to a new year, there is plenty to reflect on. Many of the challenges and uncertainties we face as a society remain—whether we're talking about climate change or the recent rise in COVID cases. But despite these challenges, this year has also highlighted some things to be grateful for, and dare I say, hopeful about.

During this difficult time, the strength of our network has never been more apparent to me. Over the past several months, our staff, partners, supporters, and friends have all demonstrated their steadfast commitment to protecting the health of people and the environment. I have been heartened and energized by the many conversations I've had with our members throughout the year. I have also had the privilege of working alongside our staff, who despite difficult circumstances, have shown nothing but resolve and creativity in carrying out our mission. We have a lot to show for our work this year; this newsletter illustrates that.

Sustained commitment to our mission also requires us to find hope, and there are certainly things to be hopeful about. A change in leadership at the federal level marks an opportunity for our country to once again take seriously the threat of climate change, to value science, and to develop solutions that match the scale and complexity of the problems we face. Thanks to science, there is also hope on the horizon that some normalcy will someday return to our lives. There's hope that we as a network come out of this crisis stronger and more dedicated than ever to stand up for what is right. Thank you for being part of our network and moving with us into a brighter future. //

#### OUR MISSION: Protect Water. Heal Land. 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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Water Policy Specialist

## \$21 TO CONFRONT CLIMATE CHANGE

Monthly giving is a great option for both PRN and you. If you want to confront climate change for the long fight ahead, becoming a sustaining member is for you!

From agriculture to energy, to rivers and wildlife habitat, PRN's interconnected programs address the sources and impacts of climate change. And your support is needed to move our cause forward in 2021.

Please consider being a monthly donor. It is easy to do. For only \$21 a month, you will be a major supporter of Prairie Rivers Network. Automatic debit from your bank account means your donation is guaranteed to make an impact each month. You won't have to worry about your credit card expiration date, and your membership will never expire. You can cancel at any time.

Use the enclosed remit envelope or go online.

**Renew Your Membership OR  
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Energy Campaign Coordinator

ANDREW REHN  
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SARAH SCOTT  
Membership Development Assistant



# PROTECT WATER.

## A YEAR OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

**While this year has been fraught with a number of challenges in our efforts to protect water, there have been amazing bright spots. This is just a taste of some of the progress we have made in safeguarding Illinois' water resources.**

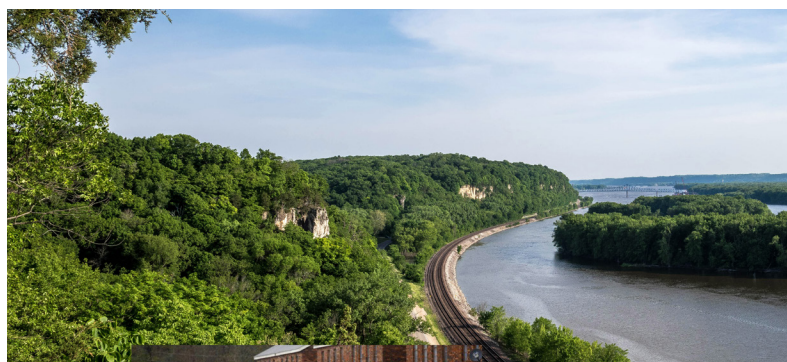
Following last year's win with the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act, our energy team has been working hard to ensure the rules that regulate coal ash are as strong and protective as possible. The rulemaking process has continued despite the COVID-19 crisis with virtual hearings in August and September. Scores of folks signed our petition, and over a hundred people spoke at the online hearing.

### Is Your Water Safe?

In May, PRN Agricultural Programs Specialist Catie Gregg began a survey of rural wells to raise awareness of the dangers of nitrate in our drinking water. Elevated levels of nitrates in drinking water could mean you or your family are at a higher risk for certain health conditions (e.g., blue baby syndrome, certain cancers, and thyroid issues). Sixty-five nitrate test kits were sent across Illinois while additional educational materials were sent to many others.

We joined partners in several lawsuits challenging the harmful practices of several federal agencies. We are working together against the Trump administration's EPA, the Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Army Corps of Engineers to ensure better protection for wetlands and headwater streams, Lake Sturgeon, and the Mississippi River.

Our Clean Water Act lawsuit against Dynegy for illegal discharges on the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River has made progress this year after some initial setbacks. The lawsuit has received national attention as one of the first applications of an important US Supreme Court decision on a similar Clean Water Act case in Maui. PRN is currently fighting another attempt by Dynegy to have the case



### The Mississippi River

dismissed, and we'll continue fighting to protect the Middle Fork, Illinois' only National Scenic River.

### Plan for the Future

The Illinois State Water Plan is being updated for the first time in 40 years. The plan provides guidance on how the state manages water resources, covering issues from water quality and climate change to recreation and equity of access. This is a tremendous opportunity for Illinois to create a bold, inclusive vision for Illinois' water resources, and PRN has several staff working with state agency personnel to ensure that the plan protects public health and the environment.

American Rivers designated the Upper Mississippi as America's #1 Most Endangered Rivers®. This the second year in a row it landed on the list. PRN Water Resources Associate Ryan Grosso helped rally support from our membership to take action to protect the river. PRN also joined with the National Wildlife Federation and three other conservation groups in filing a lawsuit against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over the impacts of its plan for managing a 195-mile section of the Mississippi River between St. Louis, Missouri and Cairo, Illinois.

None of this work would be possible without the continued support of our dedicated members. Thank you for helping us protect water across Illinois! //



# HEAL LAND.

TO CARE FOR LAND IS TO CARE FOR WATER.

If COVID-19 has taught us anything in 2020, it has shown us just how vulnerable our food system is to disruptions. We have taken for granted yeast, canned goods, fresh fruits and vegetables, but all are produced in a system that is not sustainable.

## Reporting on Damage

In August, PRN, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Xerces Society published a report titled *Drifting Toward Disaster: How Dicamba Herbicides are Harming Cultivated and Wild Landscapes*. “In Illinois we’ve seen firsthand the effect that herbicide drift has on public and private lands, wildlife habitat, and farms that grow sensitive crops,” said Kim Erndt-Pitcher, PRN Habitat and Agriculture Programs Specialist. “The EPA seems more concerned with the needs of industry and manufacturers than those of farmers and the environment.”

We also released the *2018-2019 Tree and Plant Health Monitoring Report*, the findings of which came from the hundreds of hours PRN members and partners such as Mary Kemper, Lou Nelms, and Seth Swoboda volunteered. The report revealed that symptoms of off-target herbicide injury were frequent, widespread, and present in a wide variety of plant types in the regions that were monitored.

PRN was active on the ground with farmers in southern Illinois. With the plants we grew from our seed collecting efforts, we helped create three “pollination stations” or pollinator gardens on local farms. We also maintained pollinator plant seed plots on farms across the state.



## Working with Partners

We provided input along with our partners on Illinois’ Soil Health Strategy. This is a nationwide effort by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to include soil health as a goal of their programs and policies.

We continue to work with our partners in Regenerate IL, a statewide network with a mission to cultivate an equitable food system. Together we are connecting all groups and individuals working to create a food and farming system for Illinois that is just, fair, and based on regenerative agriculture.

Our work with farmers is also drawing connections to the ways they are fighting climate change and benefiting from renewable energy. With partners we featured a small farm’s solar array on a video tour and co-hosted a webinar on climate change and its impact on southern Illinois farming.

## Your Support Matters

The work PRN does around healing land is a direct result of the dedicated support of volunteers, advocates, and our members. We cannot change industrial agriculture overnight. It takes years of hard work and dedication if we are to form a system on which the entire community of life depends. //





# INSPIRE CHANGE.

YOU TOOK ACTION TO ACHIEVE SO MUCH.

Inspiring change in 2020 was made more challenging with the inability to meet, advocate in Springfield, and talk with legislators in person. As with so much of our work this year, engaging the community and those that represent it moved online.

### The Power of One Voice

Before the COVID-19 restrictions were put in place, PRN helped plan two major events in Springfield. With the help of longtime PRN member Chris Main and her group of volunteers, we gathered signatures on an important petition in support of the Clean Energy Jobs Act (CEJA). In total, Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition groups gathered more than 23,000 signatures for CEJA, which we helped deliver to the Governor in January.

In early March, over 700 advocates from across the state descended on the Capitol to push for CEJA passage. Due to COVID, we couldn't hold another in-person lobby day, but in November, over 1,000 people participated in a Virtual Lobby Day for CEJA! Many took part in a week of action that culminated with legislator meetings over Zoom and then a virtual rally.

After COVID-19 restrictions were instituted, we continued to make progress in building relationships in coal communities facing plant closures, albeit virtually. PRN also helped organize several virtual town halls and meetings on the importance of a Just Transition. With additional plant closures announced by Vistra, the need for ongoing dialogue with these communities is high.

### Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

This summer, PRN worked with partners to develop policies that advance racial and socioeconomic justice, helping



Clean Energy Lobby Day in Springfield in early March.

shape workforce and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) contractor development programs, and a policy that increases funding for Illinois' low income solar program. We continue to advocate for a comprehensive energy bill that centers on equity and brings all Illinoisans into a clean energy future.

We are helping the IDEA Farm Network (IFN) grow and improve. The network now has over 500 members, up from 425 last year. During the pandemic, the IFN has held virtual field days and tailgate conversations to help farmers connect with each other when they would otherwise meet in person, walk fields, and share their stories of regenerative farming together. Despite COVID-19, the group continues to share and grow.

We are hopeful that 2021 will once again bring us together, so that the power of our collective voice can move our cause forward in Springfield, in Washington, and in communities across Illinois. //



## TAKE ACTION TODAY!

If you haven't taken action yet on these two important issues, now is the time to let your voice be heard.



(Photo credit: Frank McNamara Flickr)

### The Illinois State Water Plan

Back in March, we shared the news that Illinois is updating the State Water Plan for the first time since 1994. You can help shape the future of water in Illinois by taking a public survey that will help guide the process.

We want you to tell the State of Illinois how passionate you are about protecting Illinois' water resources. It's particularly important to tell the State that public health and the environment, including ensuring clean, safe drinking water to all residents, should be the highest priority. This survey is quite short and should only take a few minutes to complete. Complete the survey by January 15th.

### Most Endangered River: Mississippi

In April, American Rivers named the Mississippi as the #1 Most Endangered River in the United States. If you haven't already, we need you to write to Congress and the heads of several agencies and tell them to develop a management plan that balances public safety with environmental needs.

Take Action Today at:

[prairierivers.org/  
take-action](http://prairierivers.org/take-action)

## ANNUAL DINNER @HOME

Covid-19 prevented us from hosting what would otherwise be our much anticipated chance to meet with our members, share our accomplishments, and celebrate this year's amazing award winners to rounds of applause. October 23rd's PRN Annual Dinner @Home virtual event was a resounding success in no small part to your participation! If you missed the premiere of the Prairie Rivers Network event, you can still watch the video on our YouTube channel!

We had an amazing turnout for our @Home virtual dinner. Over 135 people tuned into the premiere on our YouTube channel, and as we went to print, an additional 400+ people viewed the video! That is truly an overwhelming outpouring of support! Thank you!

### Award Winners

Each year we look forward to celebrating the good work of our award winners, and this year was no exception. The River Steward Award went to Pat Lawlor of Marengo. You can read her story on the following page.

Our Volunteers of the Year were Chris Main of Champaign-Urbana, Toni Oplt with the Metro East Green Alliance, and Dulce Ortiz who is co-chair of Clean Power Lake County. These three awardees have gone above and beyond in the fight to stop coal ash pollution and stand up for impacted communities.

The Outstanding Public Servant award went to our public health professionals and was accepted on their behalf by Public Health Administrator of Champaign County Julie Pryde and Director of the Illinois Department of Public Health Dr. Ngozi Ezike. Officials in Illinois recognized early the threat this virus posed and made science-based decisions under incredibly difficult circumstances. Our public health professionals are on the front lines protecting us from this devastating virus every day.

### Keynote Speaker

This year's keynote speaker was Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali. A renowned thought leader, Dr. Ali is an internationally known speaker, policy maker, and the National Wildlife Federation Vice President of Environmental Justice, Climate, and Community Revitalization. Dr. Ali echoed the words of Dr. Martin Luther King: We are all in the same boat. This is the only planet we have. We must all work together to protect it. //





# 2020 RIVER STEWARD AWARD

This year’s River Steward Award went to Pat Lawlor of Marengo, Illinois for her work on the Kishwaukee River Water Trail in McHenry County in northeastern Illinois. Pat was nominated by Cindy Skrukud and the Environmental Defenders of McHenry County, who lauded Pat for her efforts to create a new water trail on the Kishwaukee River.

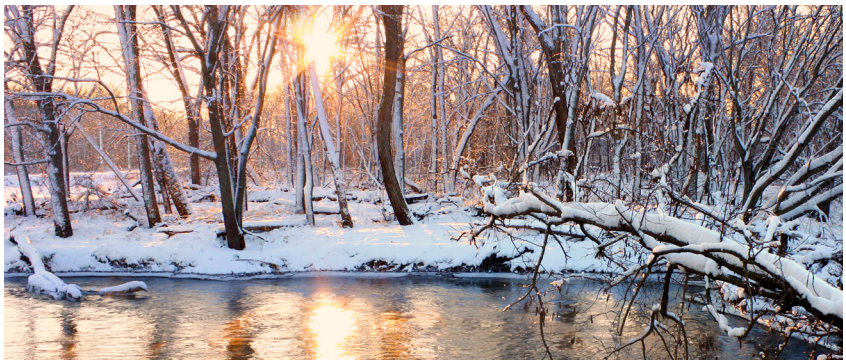


In her nomination, Cindy wrote, “Since retiring two years ago (from her second career after her first as a science teacher), Pat Lawler, a Marengo resident and a 34-year member of the Environmental Defenders of McHenry County, has become a ‘force of nature’ in regard to her efforts to establish a new water trail on the Kishwaukee River in McHenry County.”

Pat established a volunteer organization called Paddle the Kish in Marengo and has recruited, organized, and led volunteers to work on the water trail. She tirelessly brought together a broad coalition of stakeholders to protect the Kishwaukee River watershed.

“Thank you to the Prairie Rivers Network for this River Steward Award for 2020. I’m honored that you thought of us,” Lawlor said in a video submitted for our Annual Dinner @Home event. “The 700 volunteers for Paddle the Kish in Marengo are very excited about the recognition from this statewide organization.”

Pat led efforts to fund the development of launch sites on the water trail in order to create areas for family-friendly paddling in the Marengo area. Getting people out on the river is one of the best ways to build the next generation of river and conservation advocates. Her stewardship has made the Kishwaukee Water Trail a reality. //



Sunset sparkles off the Kishwaukee River in northern Illinois.

# LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

This year, we have missed hosting events like our annual dinner or trips to the Middle Fork. That’s why programs like our podcast are so important. *Stories from the Floodplain* lets us give you stories you might enjoy while also highlighting our work and the work of others in the community.

In *Shock to the Food System*, we talk with three different organizations on the front lines of food in Illinois, each with a unique perspective on how they are coping with COVID-19 and the vulnerabilities in our food system.



In *Water Transcends Boundaries*, we sit down with Kimberly Neely du Buclet, a commissioner for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) to discuss what MWRD is doing to improve the lives of all Chicagoans.

In *Long Live the Great Lakes Republic*, we have a conversation with Dr. Rachel Havrelock, founder of the Freshwater Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago. We discuss why the US EPA is failing in its duty to enforce environmental protections and how new, watershed-based political institutions could fill the vacuum.

Be sure to subscribe to *Stories from the Floodplain* wherever you get your podcasts!

Listen at:  
[prairierivers.org/podcast](http://prairierivers.org/podcast)



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# Unlock \$10,000 in December With Your Donation

Dear Friends,

We have some very exciting news to share with you...a generous member has pledged to donate \$100 for every donation we receive in December, up to \$10,000.

With your donation, you can unlock an additional \$100 to help the fight against climate change.

Our network is growing every day, because of people like you, who value science and understand the dangers of climate change. Our members want to do everything they can to ensure we all have access to clean water, a healthy food system, and natural areas that are vital to human health and well-being.

We very much appreciate the support of our members. **If you are in a financial position to do so, we are asking you to please make a donation today because we have a lot of work to do in 2021.**

Working to confront climate change and its devastating effects is the ultimate challenge—the challenge of our time. This work is certainly not without its struggles—progress on this issue is often met with resistance. Yet, together with our members and partners, we are extremely proud of what our network has accomplished this year.

But our work is never done. We are up against big polluting industries with deep pockets and an unconscionable willingness to pollute our rivers, destroy wildlife habitat, degrade the land, and deny that climate change threatens every one of us. To make matters worse, all of this is happening while a pandemic rages across the country.

Every major crisis our society is currently facing—the COVID pandemic, racial injustice, pollution, partisanship, climate change, community health and well-being—all form a complex, interrelated web.

With your help, PRN is fighting back against the assault on the environment and the threats it poses to our communities. This spring, we filed suit on behalf of our rivers to

restore Clean Water Act protections. We must continue to fight for healthier communities that are free from pollution.

**Our members make a difference! You can make a difference!**

**Your support is needed so we can move forward in 2021.**

We cannot do this work alone. During our virtual Annual Dinner @Home event this year, we heard a certain refrain among our partners, friends, public health officials, and community leaders. *We are all in this together.* The problems we face are complex, and will require all of us working together to solve them.

This year has presented serious, unprecedented challenges, for sure. If anything, it has brought more urgency to the need for a healthier environment and more resilient communities. We need to do everything we can to confront climate change and combat pollution in our communities, to ensure our future looks brighter than the present. Our future depends on our ability to continue this fight.

With your support:

- We can ensure that Illinois is a leader on climate—achieving 100% renewable energy by 2050.
- We can help farmers adopt better practices to produce food without polluting our water and without the use of dangerous pesticides and herbicides.
- We can protect and restore the health of our lands and waters for the benefit of people and wildlife, alike.

**We have ambitious goals for our future. But we cannot do this work without you. Please donate today!**

Thank you,

*The staff of Prairie Rivers Network*

**Your Donation Can Unlock  
An Additional \$100  
To Fight Climate Change.**