



## VICTORY FOR THE MIDDLE FORK!

By Andrew Rehn

The Middle Fork is one big step closer to being a well-protected river. On June 22nd of this year, the State of Illinois announced that it was suing Dynegy for pollution caused by their three coal ash ponds along the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. The same day, the State filed an agreement with Dynegy that the company would propose a plan that includes removal of all three coal ash ponds from the floodplain of the river. This marks the first time in Illinois that Dynegy has agreed to close an ash pond by removal, and it is the first site in many years to propose such a plan.

The State's agreement has Dynegy proposing a closure plan through Illinois' new coal ash rules, created by the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act, which was finalized in April of this year. The first step in that closure process involves the company presenting a closure plan at a public

meeting. The agreement requires Dynegy to hold that meeting on or before December 17, 2021. After the meeting, Dynegy will propose the plan to the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency who will review the plan, hold a comment period and public hearing, decide on the plan, and publish a response to the public's comments with their decision. If all goes well, Dynegy will then begin removing the coal ash.

The agreement also requires some interim protections – and here Prairie Rivers Network and our partners at Eco-Justice Collaborative and Earthjustice will continue to be vigilant. Dynegy has to begin de-watering the coal ash, which is a necessary step before beginning removal. The dewatering process will require a modification to Dynegy's NPDES permit which has its own set of environmental concerns as the water removed from the coal ash will be contaminated and will need to be disposed of safely.

Another interim protection required by the agreement is a water collection trench between the coal ash ponds and the river. We do not have many details at this point, but such a plan will likely require approvals from the Army Corps, the National Park Service, and the Illinois EPA. We will be tracking those details as they emerge and ensuring that any proposed plan is installed in a protective manner.

Lastly, the interim agreement has Dynegy reporting on erosion at the site monthly to ensure that the ponds are stable. Dynegy will have to prepare an emergency action plan for protecting the river bank should failure become imminent. Similar to the bank armoring proposal from a few years ago, this will require approval from multiple agencies, and we want to ensure that any protection is constructed in a way that does not leave a permanent scar on the river – especially now that full removal is on the horizon.



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## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

### ELLIOT BRINKMAN

I hope this summer edition of our newsletter finds you all well. In its pages, you will find ample reason to celebrate, and you will hopefully gain insight into the wide-ranging work we are doing to protect people and the environment. This work is challenging; the problems we seek to solve are complex and require a great deal of time, energy, and creativity. Patience and persistence aren't just lofty virtues, they're a job requirement.

Nowhere is the need for long-term commitment to the work better illustrated than the decades-long effort to protect the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. In the not-too-distant past, courageous activists and advocates (yes, many of you) came together to halt a destructive reservoir project that would have left the river permanently altered. Through your continued efforts, this crown-jewel was awarded national designation as Illinois' only National Scenic River.

These early victories were cause for celebration and could have even provided our tireless advocates (you, again) a prime opportunity to ride off into the sunset. But fortunately you didn't. When threats to the river remained, you answered the call. And with a great deal of patience and persistence, we have added to that list of victories, leaving our river better than we found it and learning many lessons along the way.

But the context in which we apply those lessons is constantly changing. The world is changing. *The climate is changing.* While our *persistence* has never been more vital and necessary, this moment no longer affords us the privilege of *patience*. So while we can certainly find joy in celebrating our victories, let's continue to keep an eye toward the future, and together, embrace the work ahead with the tenacity and urgency it requires. //

We have always loved the natural world and have tried to do our part to protect it. As a hunter, fisherman, and avid birder, Randy has always been interested in conservation. And thanks to his career as a produce inspector, he is well aware of the importance of a healthy and vibrant food system and the pitfalls of one that focuses around a monoculture.

As a teacher for over 45 years, I used my love of science and the natural world in a way that would hopefully inspire future conservationists. Now that we are retired, we get to spend more time doing the things like working with PRN staff to create habitat for the pollinators, birds, and other wildlife we treasure. PRN's use of sound science, education, and advocacy to protect our ecosystems and communities has never been needed more.

We must remember there are things each of us can do to help tackle these big, complex problems. And that is why we give to PRN and put PRN in our will.

Grace and Randy Madding



### 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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# PROTECT WATER.

## NEW REPORT ON NITRATE IN SHALLOW WELLS.

PRN released a report in June that looks at nitrate contamination of Illinois shallow rural wells.

By [Catie Gregg](#)

Nitrate is one of the most common drinking water contaminants. And shallow rural wells are particularly vulnerable to nitrate contamination because they are more likely to receive water directly from the surface, and thus there is less time for soil chemistry to reduce the nitrate into other forms. We have been looking at nitrate contamination of shallow rural wells in Illinois and recently released a report on our findings.

### A Lack of Data a Catalyst for the Report

Unfortunately, there was actually very little data available on shallow rural drinking water in Illinois. This is a big part of the problem. Unlike some of our neighboring states, Illinois has not completed a comprehensive survey of private drinking water wells. Also, private wells, unlike public water, are not required by the U.S. EPA to be tested. Therefore, maintaining the well, monitoring its water quality, and treating the water if contaminated are all the responsibility of the well owner. This means we do not know as much about the water quality well owners are experiencing.

In our report, we looked at a combination of what data was available and performed an analysis of our own. National studies conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey found some wells in Illinois to have exceptionally high levels of nitrate. **In fact, the single most contaminated well in their study was from Illinois with nitrate levels at almost 8x the safe drinking water standard.** West central Illinois and the Lower Illinois River Basin were singled out as areas where wells often have elevated nitrate levels. While Illinois has not conducted a statewide survey of rural wells, they did do a pilot study testing the methods they would use for such a study. The five counties they looked at had on average 18% of their rural wells over the safe drinking water standard.

Additionally, we found nitrate levels in untested private domestic wells by looking at nearby public shallow rural wells for which there is data. These wells can be used as a proxy to learn about the likely extent of nitrate contamination in private rural wells. We focused on well data from public sources outside of municipalities (e.g., restaurants, places



of worship, campgrounds) which tend to be shallower than community water systems. Our findings show widespread nitrate contamination of wells throughout Illinois, with particularly high concentrations along major rivers like the Rock, Mississippi, and Illinois.

### Farming Practices Key to Reducing Nitrates

Farmers, as rural residents, are some of the people most affected by nutrient pollution, but they are also the ones in the position to change it. Eighty percent of nitrate comes from our agricultural lands. There are both in-field and edge-of-field practices that can make our water cleaner, and these practices also make farms more resilient to a changing climate. They can help manage the more concentrated high intensity rain storms that have become commonplace.

Every farmer should be learning about farming practices that can keep nitrate out of our drinking water. We all depend on having access to clean water, and no one can do it alone.

This year we were able to, in cooperation with partners, get the first state funding for the IL Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy effort to reduce nutrient pollution. As Illinois is in the process of updating the State Water Plan, PRN will continue to push for the state to conduct a comprehensive survey of our groundwater that includes nitrate, as our neighboring states have done. This will give our agencies the information they need to develop a long term plan for our water quality. //

The report is available at:  
[prairierivers.org/whats-in-your-well](http://prairierivers.org/whats-in-your-well)



Prairie Rivers Network and its members have long cherished the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River for its beauty, its ecological diversity, and its importance as a place to reconnect to the natural world. The following article which appeared in the Spring 2018 PRN newsletter is being republished and updated in this edition because the hard fought victory that we and our partners have achieved this year warrant a retelling of the fight for the Middle Fork.

The fight for the Middle Fork has been decades-long, and without the tireless work of many folks who have stood up for the river, we would not have it today. In January 2018, PRN took steps in protecting Illinois' only National Scenic River by announcing our intention to sue Dynegy for ongoing pollution of the Middle Fork. The coal ash at Dynegy's closed Vermilion Power Station has been polluting the river for decades, and we have been looking to put a stop to that and permanently protect the river for generations to come.

### The Effort to Stop the Dam

In 1966, the land that would become the Middle Fork State Fish & Wildlife Area was on the Army Corps list of planned



dams and reservoirs. To build the dam that would flood the area to create the reservoir, state and county governments started purchasing land in the Middle Fork river valley from the farmers and other private landowners along the banks of the river. Even the coal ash pits at the power station, then owned by Illinois Power, would have been drowned by the dam. The ash would have made the lake a risky drinking water source; although, we did not know as much about the threats of coal ash then as we do now.

The dam was opposed by the Committee on the Middle Fork that fought tirelessly to stop it. The land grab by the state and county ended up working for the Middle Fork River, as the Committee saw an opportunity to turn the river valley, now largely owned by the public, into a recreational and wildlife space. In '77 and '78, the land was turned over to conservation, connecting and expanding Kennekuk County Park in the north and Kickapoo State Park in the south with the new Middle Fork State Fish and Wildlife Area to create a contiguous park and wilderness area.

### Middle Fork Declared National Scenic River

But even that was not enough to protect a river, as proponents for the dam revived the reservoir project in

## MIDDLE FORK TIMELINE

8,000 years ago  
First human inhabitants leave projectile points and other evidence of the earliest occupation of the Middle Fork valley

1964/1969  
The U.S. Corps of Engineers rejects the reservoir plan to dam the river and State purchases first parcel of land for Dept. of Conservation

15,000 years ago  
The river cuts through glacial till creating the beautiful bluffs and unique geology of the river valley

1,000 years ago  
Late Eastern Woodland Native Americans build complex ceremonial and burial mounds

1976  
Statewide opposition to destructive, unnecessary signatures for land to be

# MIDDLE FORK VICTORY.

A STORY DECADES IN THE MAKING.

the early '80s. To ensure that the Middle Fork would not be threatened by another dam or other man-made ecological disaster, advocates for the river worked to get the National Park Service to give the Middle Fork the National Scenic River designation. Ultimately, they were able to get the General Assembly to make a recommendation that the Middle Fork be added to the US list of National Scenic Rivers, one of the few in the Midwest, and to date the only designated in Illinois.

## The Threat to the River

Now, Dynegy's Vermilion Power Station is the last inholding of privately owned land along the 17 mile stretch of otherwise publicly owned land that is part of the National Scenic designation. The power plant was closed in 2011, but for decades it dumped coal ash in three huge coal ash impoundments on the banks of the Middle Fork. That coal ash, which can contain pollutants such as arsenic and lead, seeps contaminants through the riverbanks at the site. Compounding that threat is the constant meandering of the river, which is moving closer and closer to the toes of the impoundments containing the ash.



Protecting a river takes constant vigilance. The coal ash is the closest and most immediate threat to the river's long term vibrancy. By suing, PRN took the next big step building on all of the great work that many folks have put in to permanently protect the river so that generations to come can know and love one of Illinois's hidden treasures.

**In June 2021, the State of Illinois and Dynegy Midwest Generation/Vistra reached an interim agreement whereby Dynegy will propose plans to remove all of the three coal ash ponds that threaten and which are polluting the Middle Fork. There are a number of steps between now and when the Middle Fork is free and clear of the threats coal ash poses, but this event is momentous and a catalyst for addressing the coal ash ponds at power plants across Illinois.**

1989

Advocates succeed in getting the Middle Fork designated as Illinois' first—and only—National Scenic River

2019

Illinois passes Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act

2007

PRN's multi-party lawsuit brought against Dynegy-Midwest Generation results in tougher limits on mercury emissions and the permanent protection of 1,100 acres of land along the Middle Fork River

2021

After years of advocacy by PRN and partners, Dynegy agrees to move the ash from the river in an agreement with the State of Illinois

this environmentally friendly project collects 50,000 tons of coal ash from a river park

# INSPIRE CHANGE.

## COMMITTED TO AN EQUITABLE CLIMATE BILL.

The spring legislative session has come and gone, and Illinois still has not passed the comprehensive climate bill that we have been working so hard to pass.

By Kim Knowles

Like with any comprehensive legislation, there are multiple constituencies and competing interests vying for wins. What is new this year though is the broad power and support the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition has built among a wide and inclusive array of people, organizations, and public officials, including the Governor's office and key legislative champions. It is because of this power that we are able to hold strong on protecting key values and principles that center equity and climate protection in an omnibus energy bill that we can still pass this summer.

We discussed many of those values in our Spring 2021 newsletter. They include a commitment to decarbonizing Illinois' power sector, ensuring that BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) communities and contractors are empowered by and benefit from clean energy policies, creating a just transition for fossil fuel workers, and electrification of the transportation sector.

One of the central areas of disagreement surrounds the Prairie State coal plant, a massive coal fired power plant and mine in Marissa, Illinois that is the top emitter of planet-warming greenhouse gases in Illinois and one of the ten largest emitters in the country. Fossil fuel interests and their supporters have been busy spreading false claims about the plant and insisting that it remain



open indefinitely. We debunk these claims in a recent blog post at [prairierivers.org](http://prairierivers.org) and hold steadfast with the Clean Jobs Coalition on insisting on a steady ramping down of emissions and ultimate closure of this and all coal plants in Illinois. Likewise, we insist that the Illinois climate bill must deliver measurable benefits to BIPOC people and businesses.

We expect the Illinois General Assembly to reconvene in August to "get the job done." In the meantime, we will continue the hard but necessary work of outreach, negotiation, and organizing.

Please help by joining Prairie Rivers Network today. Our members are essential to our victories. Take action to help pass a comprehensive and equitable climate bill in Illinois here. //



## PRN ANNUAL DINNER

Friday, Sept  
 Space Limited to  
 Pre-Dinner Guided  
 Shuttle Bus S  
 Overnight Lodg  
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# ANNUAL DINNER AT ALLERTON PARK

We are thrilled to be hosting our Annual Dinner on Sept 17th at one of Illinois' historical treasures — Allerton Park, the place where Prairie Rivers Network first began. Allerton Park is a beautiful 1,500 acre natural wonder with woodland and prairie landscapes, sculpture gardens, and hiking trails.



## Coming Together Again to Celebrate Our Rivers

In 1967, the proposed Oakley Reservoir on the Sangamon River would have put hundreds of acres of Allerton Park underwater if it was not for the action of dedicated activists. Those hard working people were the catalyst and founders of what is now Prairie Rivers Network. Over 50 years later, some of those same people are PRN members today. We continue their legacy of protecting the rivers we love. Allerton Park first brought us together — what better place to gather again after a long time apart? We can't wait to see you!

## Outdoor Cocktail Dinner - Rain or Shine

Join us as we celebrate our award winners, mingle with friends, and enjoy delicious food, drink, and desserts from Michaels' Catering. Our outdoor cocktail dinner will be under a tent next to the majestic mansion and reflecting pond. Eat, drink, and sit wherever you want. The wine and beer will flow freely, but it won't be our usual formal sit-down dinner.

You can explore Allerton Park a little bit more in-depth with a pre-dinner guided nature walk with an Allerton naturalist alongside PRN Board members! For those in the C-U area, we are also offering shuttle bus service from C-U to Allerton Park.

## Overnight Lodging and After-Party

With so much to see and do at Allerton Park, extend the evening with a unique overnight stay at the mansion or at their Evergreen Lodge. And after the Annual Dinner wraps up, you can still visit with friends at the firepit on the Mansion terrace. //

**Reservations are required for all activities. Please visit [prairierivers.org/dinner](http://prairierivers.org/dinner) for all the details and the latest COVID-19 guidance!**

# ReGENERATE ILLINOIS

By Kim Erndt-Pitcher

Many people get to choose how the food they eat was grown, how it lived and died, and how it was processed and delivered. They can choose the types of farms they support when they hand over the money to pay for a product. Many, however, are not as fortunate. Access to healthy, nutritious, and humanely raised food that is affordable is challenging for most families. Life during the pandemic and the disruptions in the food chain and daily life that it caused highlighted this for many in Illinois and beyond.

But, when it comes to how modern industrial agriculture damages the environment and negatively impacts public health, there is very little control. Nitrates and phosphates continue to pollute our waterways, soils erode, pesticides enter our water and kill our trees and food crops, and there are few consequences. Additionally, large swaths of farmland are being bought by corporations and individuals that do not live in Illinois and that do not live with the consequences of how the land is farmed. This also makes it more difficult for local farmers to access affordable land.

That is why Prairie Rivers Network is proud to be a part of the ReGenerate Illinois Network, a food and farming movement that aims to even the playing field. This summer, the Network is expanding its efforts to build a food system for Illinois that is fair, just, and equitable for the farmers, the eaters, and the people who live here, to build a food system that protects our water, air, soil, and wildlife.

For more information and to stay up to date on what is happening visit [www.regenerateillinois.org](http://www.regenerateillinois.org). And if you want to participate in the conversation join our listserv!

**LEARN MORE AT  
[REGENERATEILLINOIS.ORG](http://REGENERATEILLINOIS.ORG)**

## OUTSIDE @ ALLERTON PARK

September 17, 2021, 6 - 9 pm  
250 people — RSVP by Sept 8.  
Hike with Allerton Naturalists  
Shuttle Service from C-U available  
Dinner at Allerton Park available  
[prairierivers.org/dinner](http://prairierivers.org/dinner)



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### PRN Membership Levels

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

## CREATE A LEGACY

You can help ensure that PRN has the resources we need to protect water, heal land, and inspire change for decades to come.

There are several ways you can help. Make a gift to our PRN Endowment. Make a gift in your will. Make a tax free gift from your IRA.

Many of our members have included PRN in their will. Please consider PRN in your plans and make a meaningful gift to PRN that will support our mission for generations.

[PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG/LEGACY](http://PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG/LEGACY)

