

Dear PRN Supporter,

There's no question—we're living in extraordinary times.

In many ways, things seem to only get more extraordinary by the day. The “unprecedented” has become the norm; change, the only constant. A collective sense of urgency is palpable, and for good reason. We are, in this moment, tasked with monumental challenges—addressing the threat of climate change, protecting our environment, and repairing the harms and injustices that pervade society.

Adding to the sense of urgency and overwhelm is a near-constant stream of information, bombarding us from all sides. An infinite supply of headlines and hot-takes are available at the click of a button, every minute of every day, oftentimes further obscuring the issues and the path of progress. It can be difficult to recognize sincerity, thoughtfulness, complexity, and nuance amidst the noise.

The question isn't whether we're living in extraordinary times, it's how we respond to these extraordinary times and all of the challenges and opportunities that come with them.

***The truth is, in times like these, we need each other more than ever.***

**We depend on you, our members and supporters.** Throughout the year, we depend on members and supporters like you to show up and lend your voices to calls for action, letting those in power know that we are serious, we are organized, and we demand change. ***We depend on your financial support***, which equips us with the resources necessary to respond to the most pressing environmental issues, while ensuring our financial security and sustainability during uncertain times.

**And you depend on organizations like Prairie Rivers Network.** With your support, we'll continue to carry out our mission with tenacity and persistence. We'll continue to be a credible source of science-based information and policy advocacy. We'll be a trusted and effective partner—using our knowledge, skills, expertise, and creativity to show up for others and create positive change. We will continue to honor the decades-long sacrifice required to create today's victories, like permanently protecting our state's only National Scenic River from the threat of toxic coal ash.

***Please consider making a first-time, renewal, or additional donation to Prairie Rivers Network today.***

Together, we can thrive in these extraordinary and overwhelming times. We can support each other in navigating and responding to the urgency. And through our mutual support and persistence, we can hopefully look back on these times, humbled and grateful, for the actions we take today.

Sincerely,



Elliot Brinkman  
Executive Director



## CLIMATE ACTION IN AMERICA'S HEARTLAND

By Amanda Pankau

Illinois had good news to share with the rest of the world at November's global climate summit, known as the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26). The Paris Agreement was born at COP21 (Paris 2015) with every country agreeing to work together to limit global warming to well below 2°C while pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C. Governor Pritzker attended this year's gathering of nearly 200 nations, proclaiming, "I'm here to say that in America's heartland lies a state that's taking strides to match the urgency of this moment."

The urgency of the moment was highlighted once again in August's climate report from the IPCC's "Sixth Assessment." The report is being called a "code red for humanity." The authors called human influence on climate "unequivocal" and detailed how warming is already affecting many weather and climate extremes, including increased globally averaged

rainfall and sea levels, decreasing snow cover, retreating glaciers, and the warming and acidifying of the oceans. With every increase of global warming, these changes in weather and climate extremes continue to become larger. The report's findings and reason for alarm are clear: unless there are immediate, rapid and sustained reductions in emissions, followed by net zero emissions, the goals of the Paris Agreement will be far beyond reach and our planet will become less liveable.

At COP26, Pritzker provided other leaders an opportunity for hope and an example of what real climate action looks like. After three years of work and leadership by grassroots advocates (like you!), Prairie Rivers Network, the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition, and Governor Pritzker, Illinois passed a groundbreaking, bipartisan climate bill this September.

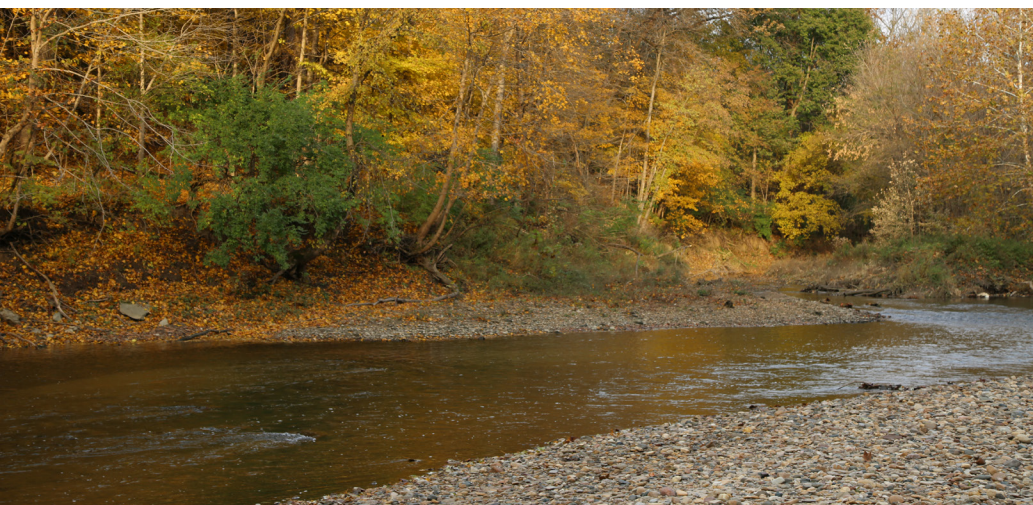
The Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) is being lauded as the

most equitable climate bill in the nation. CEJA tackles climate change and pollution by reducing carbon emissions, expands incentives for renewable energy, creates programs to support the training and growth of a diverse clean energy workforce, holds utilities accountable, and creates consumer protections. And it does these in a just and equitable way.

Illinois has made great strides in fighting climate change while centering equity, and we are setting an example. As members, you share in this year's climate victory, just as you will share in the next one. PRN is committed to ensuring the successful and equitable implementation of CEJA. There is work to be done to make additional strides in tackling carbon pollution from the Prairie State Coal Plant, coal mining, transportation, buildings, and agriculture. We will also work to turn these state victories on climate into action at the federal level as well. We know you understand how important this is, and we thank you for all you've done to help get us here.

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## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

### ELLIOT BRINKMAN

This winter edition of our newsletter affords us the ability to reflect on another year of fighting to protect our environment, and it lets us celebrate and appreciate the hard work of our staff, board, and partners. Working together, we accomplished so much through our wide-ranging programs, and we look forward to the work ahead.

This year was once again marked by the ever-evolving COVID pandemic, political strain, and social unrest. Despite no shortage of tumult and uncertainty, we have been continually humbled by the dedication of our many members and partners across Illinois. It seems that these challenging times have only strengthened our resolve to work together to protect our environment and our communities, and because of our sustained commitment, opportunities abound.

We have the opportunity to lead in addressing climate change here at home. In these pages you'll read about momentous victories that put Illinois on the path to renewable energy, while holding the fossil fuel industry accountable for the pollution they leave behind. We will continue to work in community with all of you at every level—from the policy realm to the grassroots—to ensure these victories translate to real, positive change for people and the environment.

The accomplishments reported here are more than mere words on a page. They represent tangible improvements to the health of our environment and our communities. As an important part of our network, please join us in celebrating this positive change, and stay with us as we look toward the future. With your voices and vital support, we will continue to be a trusted, effective partner in creating a healthier environment and a more just and equitable world.

#### 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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## CREATE A LEGACY

*"If each of us does our part, all the pieces of the puzzle come together and the world is a better place because of you."*

~ Dr. Jane Goodall

Our network is strong because of the collective efforts of all of our members to meet the challenges of today and the foresight to create a legacy for the future.

You can help ensure that Prairie Rivers Network has the resources we need to carry out our mission for decades to come.

There are several ways you can create a legacy:

- Make a gift to the PRN Endowment
- Leave a gift to PRN in your will
- Make a tax free gift from your IRA
- Give a donation of stocks

Many of our members have already included PRN in their wills and planned giving. If you have included PRN in your will, please be sure to let us know. Thank you for making a meaningful gift to PRN that will create a legacy of clean water and healthy rivers.

[prairierivers.org/legacy](https://prairierivers.org/legacy)

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Water Resources Engineer

#### SARAH SCOTT

Membership Development Assistant

# PROTECT WATER.

## A YEAR OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

**2021 began with political upheaval in Washington, yet despite that, our dedication to protecting Illinois' water did not waver. Our victories took many years to achieve. They took much collaboration with many partners and a sustained effort from our members and supporters when action was needed.**

Our mission to protect water reached new heights in 2021 with victories decades in the making.

### Major Victory for the Middle Fork and Illinois' Rivers

After a decades-long fight to protect the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River from coal ash, the State of Illinois and Dynegy/Vistra announced an agreement in June to move the coal ash out of the river's floodplain. This is an enormous victory for the river, and it would have been impossible if not for the tireless efforts of PRN staff, our partners, and our supporters, many of whom wrote letters, attended hearings, and traveled to Springfield to discuss the issue with legislators.

In April, the Illinois Pollution Control Board finalized strong rules regulating coal ash, capping off a rulemaking process started with the passage of the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act in 2019. This is a huge win for PRN, our partners, and the communities and rivers threatened by coal ash across Illinois.

### New Clean Energy Legislation

Another momentous accomplishment this year came in the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, (CEJA) which the Governor signed into law in September. The new law is a major victory for Illinois and the culmination of three years of grassroots community organizing and leadership by PRN and our partners at the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition. CEJA is a bold law that will put Illinois on a path to a 100% clean energy future, protect public health from pollution, provide a just transition for fossil fuel communities, enact tough utility accountability measures, and create jobs and wealth in

Illinois' Black and Brown communities. There are so many organizations, elected leaders, and people to thank for this amazing work.

### Protecting Biodiversity

In a lawsuit PRN joined with partners at the Center for Biological Diversity, the University of Chicago Law School, and FISH, a federal court ordered the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to determine whether Lake Sturgeon should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. Further success will mean endangered status for the Lake Sturgeon and an array of protections to safeguard this ancient species.

### Protecting Our Flowing Rivers and Water Resources

The Trump-era Dirty Water Rule, which gutted Clean Water Act protections for many streams and wetlands and which PRN has opposed for years, was thrown out by a federal court, an important victory in protecting our waterways.

In late June, PRN released *What's in Your Well: The Hidden Dangers of Nitrates in Rural Drinking Water*, a report highlighting the danger of nitrate contamination in rural drinking water. Illinois has some of the highest nitrate levels in private wells in the country, and this report shone a light on the issue few have focused on. We also received significant media coverage as a result of the report, raising awareness of the issue across the state.

We have worked with state agencies over the last year to ensure that the latest revision to the Illinois State Water Plan reflects our priorities of clean water for all, healthy communities, and environmental justice. This accomplishment is shared with you, our members, as your extraordinary participation during the public comment periods demonstrated the broad, public support for protecting our water resources.

The successes of 2021 would not have been possible without the continued support of PRN members. The fights are long and hard, but together we are capable of so much. Thank you! //



# HEAL LAND.

## PROGRESS AND PARTNERSHIPS.

**The challenges of healing land in a sea of corn and soybeans can be daunting. PRN, our partners in ReGenerate Illinois, and the IDEA Farm Network have worked tirelessly to make the state a safer place for the biodiversity Illinois calls home.**

While the accomplishments we achieved this year to protect water were clear cut, healing land was far more nuanced and not without significant challenges.

While PRN and partners were ultimately unsuccessful in stopping legislation to build a gas pipeline in the historically black farming community of Pembroke, hundreds of you answered our calls to action. Thank you for writing to your state legislators and the Governor in this effort! We raised awareness of the plight of these regenerative farmers and their efforts to revitalize their community through local organic food and green energy.

### Millions in Funding for Conservation

This year, we renewed our efforts to pass the Partners for Conservation bill and increase the funding for the Fall Covers for Spring Savings program to promote cover crops. We worked with partner organizations to establish messaging and outreach, and we showed legislators the power of our membership through action alerts and your contacts with legislators. When we refocused efforts on the budgetary process, the Partners for Conservation fund won increased funding to the tune of \$6 million, a huge victory!

This is the first time Illinois' Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy will have dedicated state funding. It will ensure we are able to continue monitoring the nitrate and phosphorus levels in our rivers and stay accountable to our goal of reducing nutrient pollution in our rivers by 45%.

### Supporting Our Farmers and Land

PRN is a co-founder and longstanding partner of the ReGenerate Illinois Network. Over the past year, we have

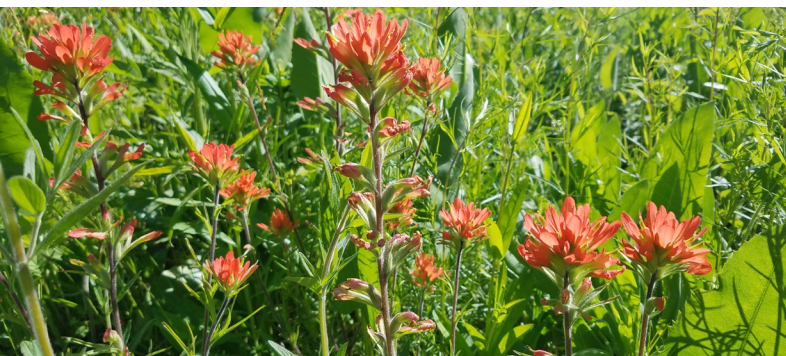
helped lead the launch and expansion of a re-envisioned ReGenerate Illinois Network which aims to be more inclusive, engaging, and representative of the wide range of interests working on food system reform. The network offers a wide range of learning and information sharing opportunities to build a food system for Illinois that is fair, just, equitable for farmers and those who rely on the food they grow, and that also protects our soil, water, air, and biodiversity.

As a lead partner in the IDEA Farm Network (IFN), a farmer-led learning community where farmers, researchers, consumers, and NGOs come together to learn better, smarter, more ecologically sound ways to farm, we are glad to have supported multiple learning opportunities for the network. We have seen continued growth and interest in the IFN despite the challenges of the pandemic.

PRN has led the charge in Illinois in protecting our farms and natural and landscaped areas from pesticide drift. We have continued our Tree and Plant Health Monitoring program which documents symptoms of off-target herbicide drift on farms, in conservation lands, and state and private properties, and expanded our tree leaf/herbicide residue monitoring program. We will release the findings of our 2020 and 2021 monitoring and sampling this winter.

We trained state agency personnel and advocates on how to identify, document, and report symptoms of herbicide drift on the lands they manage. We highlighted the threats posed to crops and native trees and plants through videos, blogs, and virtual and in-person trainings. We also partnered with the Xerces Society of Invertebrate Conservation and the National Wildlife Federation in a webinar highlighting the threats posed by the widespread use of volatile herbicides such as 2, 4-D and Dicamba to wildlife, pollinators, and the lands they inhabit.

To heal land in Illinois calls for strong, diverse relationships with folks from a wide range of experience and landscapes. Together, we are taking giant strides towards a better, healthier environment. //



# INSPIRE CHANGE.

## THE FIGHT FOR OUR FUTURE.

**You make a difference to the work we do, to our leaders in Springfield, and to the communities who rely on your advocacy. You inspire change across Illinois. Here are some of the ways we have inspired Illinois together in 2021.**

This year, PRN staff and member/volunteer Marty Kemper conducted a field visit at the Washington County State Conservation Area to teach agency staff about the symptoms of herbicide injury in trees and plants. This is part of our ongoing campaign to call attention to the threat herbicides pose to specialty crops, natural areas, gardens, and native species, and the pollinators that rely on them.

### Our Volunteers Inspire Us

We were fortunate that two amazing PRN members volunteered to write guest blogs for our website. Patsy Hirsch wrote a compelling account on the impact that the herbicide Dicamba has had on her once majestic oak trees in a piece titled A Future Shade-less Summer. Then, in Martha's Monarchs, Martha McSims chronicled her experience raising and releasing over 60 of these most beautiful butterflies.

In April, we partnered with the International Crane Foundation (Baraboo, WI), other groups, and volunteers to organize the first effort to count and document cranes in the Illinois River Valley.

### Hundreds Took Action

Thanks to the hundreds of you that took action to pass the Climate & Equity Jobs Act, Illinois' Solar for All program will expand and provide more opportunities for critical service providers and people with low and moderate incomes to go solar. We also achieved improved solar market access for Minority and Women Owned Businesses (MWBE), and we're on the way to seeing solar on Habitat for Humanity Homes and Champaign Housing Authority affordable housing properties.

Late in 2020, we called on you to comment on what Illinois needs for our updated State Water Plan. Of the 703 people who submitted comments, 25% of those were PRN members and supporters. That's amazing! And this year, your input has already had an impact. The state heard from you that water quality and climate change must be top priorities.



On April 26th, many of you joined the virtual Environmental Justice Lobby Day to ask your legislators to support the Lead Service Line Replacement Act, the Environmental Justice in Permitting Act, and CEJA.

### Fighting for a Fossil Free Future

PRN Water Resources Engineer Andrew Rehn appeared in a documentary on the Wood River Power Plant demolition in East Alton, Illinois. The plant was destroyed in early February with little notice or input from the community. The documentary shines a light on the power plant, the folks fighting to protect their communities, and the power company that has ignored their call for transparency. Watch the video at: <https://tinyurl.com/WoodRiverDoc>

With partners, we co-hosted a Geothermal Power Hour about the basics of geothermal, how people can benefit, and how the group buy program works. In March, we hosted a virtual town hall on transitioning away from the expensive, dirty, Prairie State coal plant to a cleaner energy future.

### Thank You!

Lastly, thanks to PRN members and supporters in the Champaign-Urbana area, we raised \$4,103.35 in this year's Round Up for Good at Common Ground Food Co-op in Urbana. And over the years, you've contributed over \$30,000 during the Round Up campaign. Thank you!

The support we've received from our members and supporters in 2021 has been astounding. We really could not do the work of protecting water, healing land, or inspiring change without you! //

## TAKE ACTION!

We've had an action packed year when it comes to our members and supporters advocating in Springfield and Washington, D.C. Here's how you can help. We have several active action alerts that need your immediate attention!

### Thank your Legislator

The Illinois General Assembly passed the nation's most equitable and comprehensive clean energy and climate bill, the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA), and we'd like your help in thanking them! CEJA is big and it's bold, and it's something we can be proud of. Join us in thanking our legislators for passing CEJA!



### Ask Senator Duckworth

We need to make sure the climate and clean energy funding in the Build Back Better (BBB) Act supports the needs of lower income and environmental justice communities. Ask Senator Duckworth to invest in our communities through the BBB Act!

### Support the Mississippi River

The Mississippi River lacks a holistic federal restoration program like the Great Lakes, the Everglades, and Puget Sound already enjoy. This is exactly what the Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Initiative (MRRRI) is meant to address. Tell your Congressperson that you support MRRRI!

Take Action at:  
[prairierivers.org/  
 take-action](https://prairierivers.org/take-action)

## 2021 PUBLIC SERVANT AWARD

By Amanda Pankau

PRN is proud to award Kathie Brown, Community and Economic Development Specialist, University of Illinois Extension (retired 2021) with our Outstanding Public Servant Award. Kathie served the Fulton and Mason County communities where the Duck Creek (pictured below) and Havana Coal Fired Power Stations closed in 2019. Communities were given just 3 months notice of the closures that brought workforce layoffs, environmental concerns, and a drastic decrease in local tax revenue to fund services like public schools. Immediately Kathie began working with community leaders, workers, and other organizations, like PRN, to help understand the impacts of coal plant closure, tell their stories, and plan for the future.



Last fall, PRN partnered with the Just Transition Fund and Kathie at Extension to help convene five Vistra communities undergoing or planning for closure. Kathie helped facilitate conversations to help community leaders understand how state policy could help transitioning workers and communities. With her help we connected community leaders with policy experts at the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition (ICJC), as well as at the Governor's office. These meetings were a two-way conversation, providing policy makers a chance to hear from impacted coal communities, and a chance for community leaders to understand potential policy solutions.

In September, Illinois passed the Climate and Equity Jobs Act (CEJA). Thanks to work from Kathie Brown, coal community leaders, PRN, and our ICJC partners, CEJA's just transition policies, known in the bill as the Energy Community Reinvestment Act, support coal communities and workers by ensuring that communities have access to money and support for transition, and workers have education, training, and business development support. //



# 2021 RIVER STEWARD AWARD

By Andrew Rehn

This year's River Steward Award is awarded to Tracy Meints Fox. Tracy lives in rural Peoria County and is a volunteer with organizations such as Illinois People's Action and the Central Illinois Healthy Community Alliance. Tracy was nominated for this award in recognition of her volunteer work in the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition (ICJC) on the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA).



Over the last few years, Tracy has worked closely with PRN staff on what became the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act. She played many roles throughout the process, serving on the steering committee of the ICJC, developing key policies such as the Clean Energy Primes Accelerator Program, and participating in the Downstate Caucus of the Climate Table (part of the ICJC). As pressure mounted in the legislative season, Tracy served on the negotiating team that navigated CEJA through the many competing interests in Springfield.

Tracy is always prepared, ready to ask tough questions and keep folks accountable. When something needs to be done, she is always one of the first to raise her hand. She is a fierce advocate for equity and for downstate Illinois, always consulting a wide group of individuals to ensure a diversity of voices are heard in the negotiating room. CEJA is far stronger, and may not have passed, without the many, many hours Tracy contributed to the cause. //



River Steward Tracy Fox surrounded by fellow climate advocates. All participants were COVID vaccinated and outdoors.

## HAVE YOU HEARD?

PRN's popular podcast *Stories from the Floodplain* released five episodes in 2021 with another one in the works as we go to print with this newsletter. Catch up on some of the highlights you might have missed!

In *The Transition*, we sat down to talk with president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Collin O'Mara to discuss what the new Biden administration and a new Congress mean for the environment and climate.

*A New Paradigm* featured Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali, also from NWF. He spoke about how the struggle for climate justice and a healthy environment, if it is to succeed, must be part of the struggle for civil rights and social justice.

*Spreading Poison* centered around the overuse of pesticides and the complexity of a regulatory system rigged on behalf of the chemical companies with our guest Dr. Nathan Donley, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity.

And in *30 x 30*, we spoke to Tonyisha Harris, Chicagoland Conservation Manager at the Illinois Environmental Council about her growing up and becoming an environmentalist on Chicago's South Side and the importance of the 30 x 30 program, a nationwide effort to conserve 30 percent of the land and water of the United States by 2030.

Listen at:

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

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