



CLEAN WATER ACT AT 50

By Robert Hirschfeld

This image of the earth, with all its water extracted and set beside it at scale, brings home just how limited and precious this life-giving resource is. The largest blue sphere represents all water on earth. The middle sphere represents all freshwater. And that tiny dot floating above Georgia represents all that water that exists on the earth in lakes and rivers. That's it. All the fresh surface and groundwater that sustains life on earth. And yet, despite knowing full well that humans cannot survive more than a matter of days without clean water, we have been reckless with it. We have polluted it, poisoned it, mined it, and wasted it.

Aldo Leopold wrote, "Our tools are better than we are, and grow faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides, but they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history, to live on a piece of land without spoiling it."

Indeed, as far back as we can peer into the past, it's evident that human

settlements have often struggled to balance the extraction of value from the land and the thoughtful stewardship of it. But the explosive growth of industry throughout the 19th and 20th centuries provided a rapidly expanding population with the means to inflict new horrors onto our lands and waters, at a pace and scale never-before-seen.

By 1969, the Cuyahoga River in Ohio was one of the most polluted rivers in the country. A stretch of 50 miles from Akron to Cleveland was entirely devoid of fish. In the preceding century, the Cuyahoga had caught fire at least a dozen times. But by 1969, something had changed. So when the Cuyahoga burst into flames again, this time due to petroleum products dumped directly into the river, the story of a burning, smoking river was met with shock and horror at its utter wrongness. A shift had occurred in Americans' attitudes toward the environment.

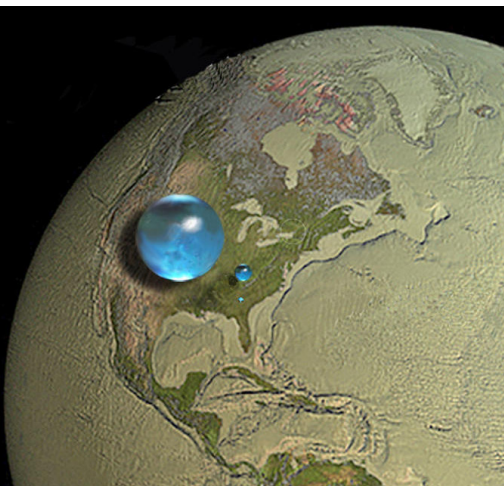
The burning of the Cuyahoga, along with other prominent environmental maladies around the US, galvanized a nascent environmental movement and took it mainstream. Clean water was something that transcended boundaries and differences. A slew of new environmental measures followed. The US EPA was established in 1970. And in 1972, Congress, in a show of overwhelming bipartisan support for the environment, passed the Clean Water Act.

Richard Nixon's EPA Administrator, William D. Ruckelshaus, urged him to sign the bill into law, telling the president, "It seems reasonable to me to spend less than one percent of the Federal budget and 0.2 percent of the Gross National Product over the next several years to assure for future generations the very survival of the Gross National Product." Nevertheless, Nixon vetoed it. But Congress, again by wide margins, overrode the veto and the Clean Water Act became American law.

The Clean Water Act is a milestone in American history; it is one of the first modern environmental laws and its importance and influence are still felt today. In many respects, the Clean Water Act succeeded. The Clean Water Act targeted what's known as point-source pollution - pollutants entering waters from the end of a pipe. And, indeed, the volume of pollutants entering waterways, particularly from factories and sewage treatment facilities, decreased significantly. The loss of wetlands (caused by filling them) was slowed. Many waterways are cleaner today than when the Act was passed. [Continued on page 11](#)

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DIRECTOR'S NOTES

ELLIOT BRINKMAN

I hope this edition of the Prairie Rivers Network newsletter finds you well! As nature once again comes to life all around us, I hope you're able to get out to fully enjoy it. Having two small children, it has never been more apparent to me that you don't have to go far to explore and connect with the natural world. While we often make weekend trips to our favorite parks and preserves, almost every day we find magic close to home in the form of newly sprouting plants, blooming wildflowers, and nesting birds. Through these experiences and observations, we too are renewed and re-committed to protecting the vast, interconnected natural world.

This is a special year for PRN. We have entered our 55th year as a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and preserving the health of our lands and waters so that people and wildlife can thrive. This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act which provides foundational water quality protections nationwide. In these many decades, we have made so much progress. In addition to celebrating the progress that we have made together through these years, we must also set a path forward to address the many challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Our work has continually been inspired and informed by you, our supporters, who understand the connection between the nature that surrounds us and the health of our planet as a whole. In these pages, you'll find that continues to ring true. Together, let's continue to be stewards of the places we love, and in doing so protect the only planet we have. //

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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WHY WE GIVE

As children of environmentalists, we learned that conservation, sustainable living, and environmental stewardship are our responsibilities to one another. We have marched, canvassed, campaigned, and fundraised for these causes.

Now we aim to share those values with the next generation. Our contribution is based in our nature school, Sprouts, where we work to include accessible nature daily in children's lives, encouraging lifelong appreciation of and dedication to nature. But our small impact isn't enough on its own.

As a community, we must support one another's efforts for a better planet. We are lucky to live in an area so well-versed in environmentalism, but PRN's decades of service and efforts preserving our precious resources prove their impact. Their focus and tenacity will continue to positively impact this community and beyond for years to come. We give to PRN because we want future generations to have the resources, environment, and Earth they deserve.

Caity Peterson and Ellen Saathoff

PROTECT WATER.

ETHANOL'S FALSE PROMISE

Although promoted by industry as an environmentally-friendly renewable fuel source, ethanol is actually fueling climate change. In our latest episode of *Stories from the Floodplain*, Dr. Tyler Lark from the University of Wisconsin-Madison discusses his recent report on ethanol's contribution to higher carbon emissions and how the nation's landscape has been changed to satisfy its false promise. Here's a brief excerpt.

PRN: Can you give a summary of your research and what you found about ethanol?

Tyler: With this study, we set out to understand the role that corn ethanol development and the broader renewable fuel policy had in shaping the American landscape, including the associated impact on greenhouse gas emissions and water quality. We found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, when you increase demand for corn for use as a fuel, that stimulates crop prices. And then that, in turn, causes expansion of corn acres with consequences for carbon emissions, fertilizer use, and nutrient pollution.

PRN: You found that ethanol isn't a particularly climate friendly fuel. In fact, it may be no better, or it may even be worse than gasoline in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. Which elements of the ethanol production cycle are really driving ethanol as a greenhouse gas emitter?

Tyler: This concept of land use change is really important and critical in that overall greenhouse gas balance of ethanol relative to other fuels. And so it's this idea that if you expand the area of land use for cropland in general, or corn in particular, there are associated consequences for the environment. Anytime you, for example, plow up something like a perennial grassland and put that into annually cultivated cropland, you're going to release some additional carbon emissions, some additional carbon from the soil out into the atmosphere. [This is also true] if you switch your crop rotations on existing crop lands, from something like soybeans or wheat to corn.

We know corn is a relatively intensive crop, and it takes extra fertilizer to help it grow. When you apply that

fertilizer, you get some nitrous oxide emissions from the nitrogen application, which is a potent greenhouse gas. You get additional emissions there, so it's really that component associated with land use, which is what we focused on in the study. It's a key factor in that overall balance, so that's what we want to take a closer look at, in hindsight, now that we've seen this policy enacted for about 15 years.

PRN: Where are we right now, in terms of the renewable fuel standard (RFS) and this policy? It's set to terminate in 2022, right?

Tyler: We're really at a pivotal moment for this Renewable Fuel Standard, the policy that governs renewable fuels in our transportation supply in the US. The policy, which was enacted back in 2007, in its current form, stipulates biofuel volumes and types annually through the year 2022. What happens next is essentially up to the EPA. This year, they're doing large environmental reviews and collecting a bunch of stakeholder input and external feedback and trying to understand this issue and decide what this policy should look like moving forwards. It's essentially a decision point where the decisions made this year for this policy will probably help define what our renewable fuel portfolio and what our landscapes look like moving forward in the foreseeable future. It's a chance to take a step back, kind of look at where we've come from, and what the outcomes of that have been, and where we as a society want to go moving forwards.

*To hear the full conversation, visit prairierivers.org/podcast. There are new episodes of *Stories from the Floodplain* every month. Subscribe, listen, and let us know what you think!*



Stories
from the
FLOODPLAIN

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ANNUAL DINNER
SEPTEMBER 16

HEAL LAND.

WHAT WILL FUTURE SUMMERS LOOK LIKE?

By Kim Erndt-Pitcher

I LOVE spring. But summer is my absolute favorite season. Bring on the heat and humidity, the abundant insects and other wildlife, and of course the lush green vegetation! It is a time when we eat vegetables out of the garden, watch the apples and pecans grow on the trees, and pull honey from the beehives. It's also when my family loves to go hiking in the Shawnee and paddling, fishing, and swimming at the many awesome lakes here in Southern Illinois.

But lately summer has become a stressful time for many, myself included. Living in a state that is dominated by agriculture means pesticide pollution, in particular, herbicide drift, is common. And many people are dealing with it year after year.

For the past five years, I have worked alongside some amazing people. We have spent many days in the late spring and summer monitoring for symptoms of herbicide drift in crops, trees, and native plant communities. We've seen symptoms in more places than we can monitor. In fact, they've been present at many places we visit.

Symptoms of herbicide drift are on the trees and plants along the lakes we play in; they are in our yards and gardens every year. We see them in trees while hiking, in the orchards where we pick peaches, and just driving around. It is difficult on an emotional level to witness and document herbicide injury year after year, especially at a site you've visited for 4+ years in a row. Tree health is declining, and some are dying. We need radical changes now.

Seeing the Signs

The signs of herbicide drift can be observed as early as the first part of May. Some trees are exposed to drift during early spring herbicide applications. This timing often coincides

with the sensitive stages of bud swell and leaf emergence in many trees. And now, with the increased use of herbicide tolerant crops which allow for the use of herbicides over the top of growing crops, we also see symptoms show up throughout much of the growing season.

When you visit an area and see folded, curled, and cupped leaves on a redbud, and then notice all the redbuds look the same... and that sycamore, and those white oaks, and even the herbaceous plants... you begin to ask questions. What does this mean for the long term health of these plants? How does this impact invertebrates and birds? What about our children who play here? We don't have answers to most of these questions, and that only adds to the stress for so many people.

Herbicides sprayed onto crops don't just drift onto neighboring farmland, they can travel long distances, move onto your property from your neighbor's lawn, and run off fields and lawns during rains to contaminate our streams and drinking water. They can volatilize, leave their intended target, and land where they harm wild plants, insects and other animals, and directly and indirectly harm the people of Illinois.

A Need for Radical Change

Our lawmakers and state regulatory agencies are not taking the actions necessary to better regulate and enforce the Illinois Pesticide Act. The people of Illinois and our environment are paying the cost. Landowners are paying the cost—financially, emotionally, and mentally.

We've heard from people all over the state who have been impacted by pesticide drift. At PRN we are working to improve the rules that govern use of the most harmful pesticides. Through our Tree and Plant Health Monitoring Program, we've documented symptoms of injury on nature preserves, state lands, private gardens, orchards, and specialty crops. But much more needs to be done.

Over the coming year, we will expand our tissue sampling and monitoring efforts, we will reach more decision makers, and we will work harder to build awareness on this issue that ultimately touches all of us. //



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Thank you for your generous support!

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THANK YOU!

INSPIRE CHANGE.

PROTECTING RURAL DRINKING WATER

Recently, PRN has partnered with the Community Development Corporation of Pembroke Township & Hopkins Park in Kankakee County to test local water quality in their area.

By Catie Gregg

Pembroke has a rich history as one of the oldest black farming communities in the US. It also has aquifers identified as especially vulnerable to nitrate contamination. Runoff from farming, including nitrates, continues to be the top driver of water quality problems in Illinois.

On the Aquifer Vulnerability to Nitrate and Pesticides map (below), we can see much of Pembroke is dark red, or excessively vulnerable due to its sandy soils and the aquifer being close to the surface. In addition to being surrounded by agriculture, 70% of residents have shallow rural wells.

In partnership with the Community Dev. Corp, we developed a water testing and education program that provides residents with the tools to test the quality of drinking water coming out of their taps.

The Scope of Nitrate Contamination in Illinois

As we investigated the extent of nitrate contamination in Illinois drinking water, we discovered a lack of comprehensive data for shallow rural wells which are especially vulnerable.

Knowing the statewide extent of nitrate contamination and location of hot spots is essential because nitrate can cause acute diseases like blue baby syndrome in infants or, as recent research suggests, cancer with long term exposure. While existing reports show the average Illinois well had

very low levels of nitrate, there were alarming hotspots with some of the highest levels in the nation. With incomplete data from around the state, it is impossible to know the extent of the problem.

As we work to better understand where Illinois groundwater may be more vulnerable to nitrate contamination, we identified certain features that increase the likelihood that wells will have elevated levels of nitrate. Those risk factors include 1) places where groundwater is close to the surface, 2) contains sandy soils, 3) is near agriculture, 4) wells are shallow (<50 ft), and 5) have dug and wide bore wells.

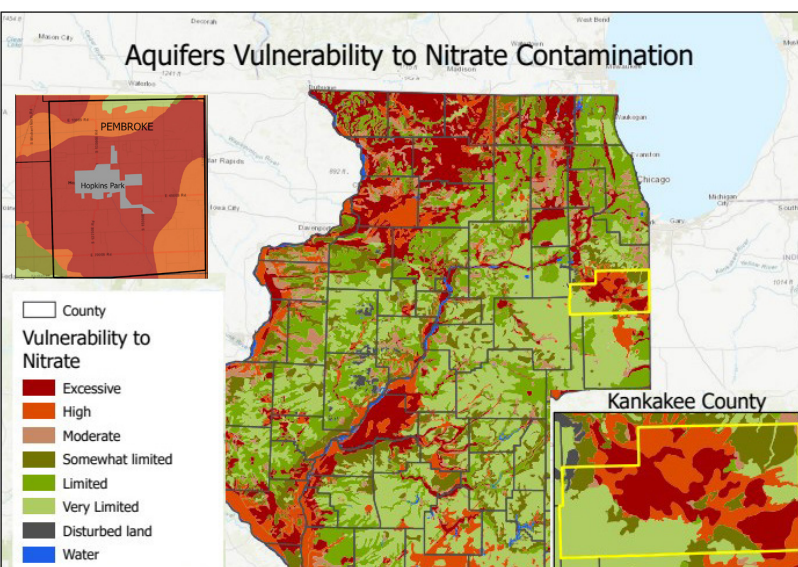
The only way to know if a well has high nitrate levels is to test the water since nitrate is tasteless and colorless. For the last two years, PRN has offered free well testing to learn more about where elevated nitrate levels exist. We are also doing outreach and education about the need for well owners to test their water.

Opportunities in Pembroke Township

Talking with the Community Dev. Corp has identified the challenges rural well owners in this community face. Some low income residents have wells that are only 15-30 feet deep, just enough to reach the groundwater. In many cases, getting a deeper well, getting a more modern drilled well, or connecting their water system to the local town of Hopkins Park is difficult and economically infeasible.

However, the same characteristics that make Pembroke's groundwater vulnerable to contamination also creates an opportunity to make dramatic changes for the better. Shallow groundwater is quickly recharged and abundant. The close connection groundwater has with the surface means people will see the impact of improved land use and farming practices to their water quality sooner than deep groundwater, which if contaminated, may take decades to run clear even after conservation practices are implemented.

PRN is prioritizing drinking water quality in the broader context of the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy to ensure we make changes where needed most, therefore having the greatest impact. //



PRN BRIEFS

There is no shortage of issues PRN works on, from clean water to energy, or agriculture to rivers and wildlife. Here we'll introduce you to some of the other issues you might not have heard about.

Next Steps Taken in Sugar Camp PFAS Lawsuit

In October 2021, PRN and Sierra Club Illinois (SC) filed a notice of intent to sue Sugar Camp Energy, LLC (Sugar Camp) for water quality violations stemming from the discharge of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) into waters near its Sugar Camp coal mine in southern Illinois. The PFAS, also known as forever chemicals, were contained in fire fighting foam that was spilled on the surface and injected underground in an unsuccessful attempt to extinguish an underground mine fire. In January, the Illinois Attorney General (AG) Kwame Raoul followed our lead, filing a similar lawsuit against Sugar Camp, alleging the company's actions violated the Illinois Environmental Protection Act.



The Big Muddy River in Southern Illinois

In early April, PRN and SC, represented by Great Rivers Environmental Law Center and Albert Ettinger, filed a "Motion to Intervene" in the AG's lawsuit. Through intervention, we seek to become a plaintiff in the case and assert our specific interests in protecting the ecosystem and recreational resources of nearby water bodies, including the Big Muddy River. Additionally, we seek to add Sugar Camp's parent companies as additional defendants to the case. The additional defendants that own and control Sugar Camp have only recently come out of bankruptcy and have been directly involved in decisions and actions associated with the case. These companies have a history of fires, pipeline ruptures, and violations of other environmental statutes. Through our intervention in the case and the addition of these defendants, we hope to ensure that the responsible parties are held accountable and responsible for remediating the damage.



Mountain Bikes at Kickapoo

For several months, PRN has been following the proposed construction of approximately 20 miles of mountain bike trails near the Kickapoo State Park with the help of long-time board member Clark Bullard. The area is a parcel of land owned by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources within the Middle Fork Vermilion National Scenic River corridor. There already exists an extensive system of mountain bike trails in the area that are operated and maintained by the Kickapoo Mountain Bike Club. While we support this type of recreation, the latest construction plans would cause irreversible damage to one of the only remaining intact forested ravines along Illinois' only national scenic river.

PRN has asked IDNR to halt any construction in this parcel for several reasons. First, public input opportunities have been non-existent. To remedy this, we support the Department's effort to reestablish the Citizens' Advisory Committee as soon as possible and commit to giving the public a voice in identifying long-term management goals for the area. There have been significant erosion issues on the current trails within the park, representing a lack of proper maintenance and enforcement against users riding on wet trails. We have also seen no effort to consider alternate locations that would minimize impacts to flora, fauna, and other recreational users. Through letters and open conversations with IDNR, the Department has expressed a willingness to pause development, and we will continue to monitor the situation as it moves forward.

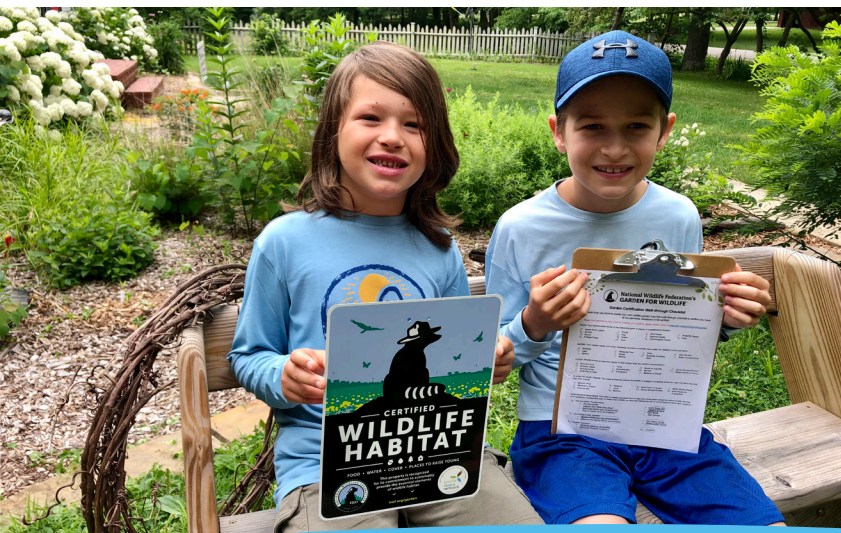
Plant Demolition Bill

This year, PRN joined partners across Illinois to support legislation that would protect power plant communities when the facility is slated for demolition. Over the last decade, half of Illinois' coal-fired power plants have retired, and with the passage of Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, the rest have closure dates on the horizon. However, few regulations exist to protect community members during the demolition of power plant facilities. This lack of protection led to the 2020 disastrous smokestack implosion at Crawford that sent a massive cloud of dust through Little Village.



(Photo credit: Alejandro Reyes, youtu.be/UzkFYVsNRFE)

Our legislation would have opened up the smokestack demolition process to critical transparency and state oversight. However, our efforts this year to support this legislation were unsuccessful. A shortened legislative session, energy legislation fatigue, and other competing legislative priorities mean that power plant communities will have to wait longer for these key protections. The next opportunity for Illinois to step up for power plant communities will come in Veto Session late this Fall. //



CERTIFIED WILDLIFE HABITAT

Providing habitat for wildlife is more important today than ever. Illinois wildlife is threatened by habitat destruction, climate change, and pesticide use. By growing native plants in your home garden, on your farm, at your place of worship, in a park, or in a schoolyard, you provide a safe haven for wildlife to forage, live, reproduce, and shelter.

Get your own NWF/PRN co-branded wildlife habitat sign for your property. A Certified Wildlife Habitat sign lets passersby know that you have provided a safe haven for Illinois wildlife. These habitats provide food, water, and shelter to wildlife that reside in your area or that migrate through. These habitats bring joy and beauty to your life and your community and inform the public of the requirements wildlife need to survive.

For certification, habitat must provide food and water resources, cover for wildlife, places to raise young, and be sustainable and adhere to ecologically sound management.

Learn how you can incorporate habitat for pollinators and monarch butterflies into your certified wildlife habitat on our website or contact Kim Erndt-Pitcher at:

kerndt-pitcher@prairierivers.org

CWA AT 50 (From page 1)

The Chicago River, a great urban river, and once the dumping ground for an entire city's waste, is a prime example of the success of the Clean Water Act. Not long ago the Chicago River was a toxic stew of sewage, industrial pollutants, and livestock yard waste. Today, fish and wildlife have returned. Paddlers are out on the water. And, if you keep your eyes open, you might spot river otters or beavers. All of this was unthinkable a few decades ago.

So there have been great successes. But one of the Act's stated goals was that all US waters should be swimmable and fishable by 1983. Almost forty years later, and we are not even close to that goal. A report released in March 2022 found that half of America's rivers and streams are impaired - neither swimmable nor fishable. As momentous as the Clean Water Act was, there are many pollutants that it does not regulate, particularly runoff from agricultural landscapes, something we're very familiar with in the Midwest.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act. We should celebrate that and mark how far we've come. But part of that celebration must be a recognition that we have a long ways to go. Our tools may grow faster than we do. But the CWA was an indication that we too, can grow. We need to take another step forward. I'll discuss where we go from here in the next newsletter. //



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If you celebrated your 72nd birthday or you turned 70 1/2 before 2020, you can make a donation to PRN by direct transfer from your IRA and your gift will count towards your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD, <https://tinyurl.com/iragift>). You might save on your taxes, too! The SECURE ACT of 2019 made major changes to the RMD, so be sure to check with your tax advisor for more information.

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prairierivers.org/riverweb

