



## HELLO, QUAD CITIES!

By Nina Struss

For a place that is topographically separated by the Mississippi River, the Quad Cities is anything but divided. Situated at the only place where the Mississippi runs east to west, the Quad Cities (or QC, as us locals call it) actually consists of five cities nestled along the river: Rock Island, Moline, and East Moline (IL) and Davenport and Bettendorf (IA). I have called Rock Island home most of my life and can attest to the fact that the Quad Cities has all the excitement of a big city but with the hospitality of a small town.

Our towns are connected by the river through events like Floatzilla; the farmers market; Red, White and Boom; or through transportation on riverboats and the Channel Cat. Home to the 2013 “Best Minor League Ballpark,” Modern Woodmen Park is situated right along the river, making game views worth the ticket price. Residents are no stranger to flanking either side of the river for dining and shopping, although most of us will admit we prefer purchasing our gas in Iowa.

### No Stranger to Flooding

As river towns, the Quad Cities are no stranger to flooding. I remember living through the Great Flood of 1993 through the lens of news anchors. My parents took me and my siblings out to see the devastation caused by the flood, but those details don’t seem to linger as well as the footage of huge numbers of people helping to save what was possible from flood damage. More recently, I remember watching the scenes captured by a downtown Davenport restaurant of the moment the levee broke in the flood of 2019. Finally, I watched as our towns were overcome with the river once again as the flood waters rose this spring.

What most of us are still learning, especially those living in the Midwest, is that flooding is not the only symptom of climate change in a river town. An accumulation of extreme weather events such as droughts, excessive heat, excessive cold, ice storms, derechos, wildfire smoke, and an increase in severe weather and tornadoes are all taking their turns here in the Midwest, and we are feeling the effects in the QC.

### River Health and Resiliency

As PRN’s new River Health and Resiliency Organizer in the Quad Cities, I will be working with the National Wildlife Federation in the development of a climate vulnerability assessment in the QC region. Our goal in this work is to provide local leaders, decision-makers, and community members with relevant information about the Quad Cities’ future as it relates to the impacts of climate change.

The driving force in the Quad Cities has always been the Mississippi River. The river sustains our cities by providing drinkable water, transportation, entertainment, and natural habitats for wildlife. As we deepen our work and network in this unique region, we will build a more resilient future for our communities. One that is better equipped to combat climate change, has safe and secure access to clean water, and in turn creates an even more beautiful and sustainable Quad Cities. //

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## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

### MAGGIE BRUNS

#### *Ushering in a More Resilient Illinois*

With extreme weather events continuing to impact Illinois' rivers, lands, and communities, it is no wonder each article of our summer newsletter mentions climate change. The climate crisis impacts all of PRN's work in countless ways and requires our comprehensive response. Whether it is planning for rising waters in river towns to cleaning up coal ash on the banks of the Middle Fork to addressing agricultural pollution threatening our forests, you can rest assured the PRN team is thinking on a systemic level to address the climate crisis.

The good news is that there is a massive societal transformation underway as we begin to implement the climate programs from the historic legislation in the Inflation Reduction Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, and the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act in Illinois, but this work is far from easy! At every turn, PRN staff are balancing the urgent need to build for a new era of resiliency and our mission to protect water, heal land, and inspire change. Sometimes that all flows together smoothly, and other times, well... you have to make really tough decisions.

Given the scale of the opportunities presented from these historic investments, PRN's small, but mighty team of nine will soon grow to a team of twelve! And we aren't stopping there! We are deepening our programmatic investments with a commitment to addressing the interconnected challenges facing our water, lands, and communities, the three areas our network cares about most. As you read along, I hope you recognize that Illinois needs the work of Prairie Rivers Network right now. Our mission, our leadership, our network, and our collective action together will usher in a more resilient Illinois. //

#### **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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## GIVING MONTHLY: VISION AND COMMITMENT

Aldo Leopold's statement is as true now as it was nearly 100 years ago: "... the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without spoiling it."

The challenge and necessity of not spoiling the environment for our own sake and for the sake of our children, grandchildren and beyond requires active effort and financial resources. We believe in PRN's commitment and vision to keep an unspoiled world available for future generations, and that is why our family contributes monthly to sustain Prairie Rivers Network efforts.

Deb and Ty Newell  
*Prairie Rivers Network Monthly Donors*  
(shown below in a family photo)



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Intern

# PROTECT WATER.

## U.S. SUPREME COURT NARROWS CLEAN WATER ACT

**For more than fifty years, Americans have relied on the Clean Water Act to ensure that the water we all depend on, *the water that sustains life itself*, is protected from pollution and degradation.**

By Robert Hirschfeld

By setting limits on the discharge of pollution and the destruction of wetlands, the United States averted environmental ruin, saw life return to its rivers and streams, and made a promise that this nation's waters would soon be fishable, swimmable, and drinkable. Although that promise has yet to be fulfilled in its entirety, the Clean Water Act changed the course of history, and its benefits are shared by all of us.

But the Clean Water Act and the health of America's waters are now in jeopardy. In its May 25 decision *Sackett v. EPA*, the U.S. Supreme Court limited the reach of the law, dramatically upending decades of precedent and protections. And the Court's majority likely set the stage for further dismantling the Act.

In the language of the statute, the Clean Water Act protects the "waters of the United States." At issue in this case was the meaning of that phrase with regard to wetlands; the Court decided which wetlands count as "waters of the United States."

### CWA in Jeopardy

On its face the Court's ruling appears narrow. The Court held, unanimously, that the specific wetland on the plaintiff's property in Idaho was not a water of the U.S. and so was not covered by the Clean Water Act. Therefore the plaintiffs did not need a permit to fill in the wetland. But this simplistic reading obscures a deep division among the Justices and the far-reaching consequences that may follow. In effect, the Court split 5-4 on the key question of how to determine which wetlands are covered with the majority opinion written by Justice Alito.

Alito effectively re-writes the statute, holding that the Act extends only to, "wetlands with a continuous surface connection to bodies that are 'waters of the United States' in their own right, so that they are 'indistinguishable' from those waters." It would appear that "waters of the U.S." refers only to relatively permanent and continuously flowing bodies of water that are themselves connected to waters that cross state lines. The potential impacts from this radical new understanding of the law cannot be overstated.

### Intermittent and Ephemeral

Most streams in the arid West are intermittent and ephemeral, filling with water and flowing only during the rainy season. Have all of these streams, rivers, and wetlands—long considered covered by the Act—now lost their protections? What about Illinois' many freestanding lakes and ponds? Levees run along many rivers in Illinois, severing the river from the wetlands of its floodplain. Without a continuous connection, are these Illinois wetlands unprotected under the new rule? There is one other, particularly ominous question that remains. Is the majority's holding limited to the filling of wetlands, or does it also apply to the discharge of pollutants? A close reading of Alito's carefully-chosen language would indicate that the majority may be on its way to a complete dismantling of the Clean Water Act as we know it. This would be catastrophic. More litigation is likely to come.

In the meantime, rivers, lakes, and wetlands in Illinois and across the U.S. are newly vulnerable. More than 85% of Illinois' wetlands have already been lost due to land use changes. Those that remain have declined in quality and species richness. We cannot afford to lose more.

Wetlands act as a giant filtration system, catching pollution before it reaches rivers and streams. Illinois has a severe agriculture pollution problem and wetlands must be part of the solution. Wetlands also soak up excess water, preventing or reducing flooding in vulnerable communities. And they serve as an effective carbon sink, capturing greenhouse emissions that would otherwise contribute to climate change.



Continued on page 7

# HEAL LAND.

## OFFICIALS WITNESS HERBICIDE POLLUTION'S TOLL

By Kim Erndt-Pitcher

We have made great strides in raising awareness about the dangers of herbicide drift and have presented irrefutable evidence of its devastation to the public, decision makers, and regulators. However, much remains to be done, and time is of the essence as tree health continues to decline across Illinois. Injuries from herbicides volatilizing and moving long distances through the air continue to plague specialty growers, conservation areas, backyards, and wild landscapes. Due to the massive scope of the problem, much of the work ahead is extremely challenging. But our allies in this work have grown, and we are building our muscles to address this threat.

In partnership with the newly formed *Save Our Trees!!! Coalition for Herbicide Pollution Accountability*, we are leading several tours across Illinois to highlight the plants, trees, crops, and communities that have been injured by drift. Most recently, our coalition led key leadership from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, the Illinois Department of Agriculture, Illinois Audubon, and Illinois State Representative Charlie Meier on a tour of Washington County State Recreation Area, Posen Woods Nature Preserve, and the State Champion Post Oak.

These tours provide critical education to Illinois agency leadership and provide area landowners the opportunity to voice their concerns regarding the injuries harming their trees and their livelihoods. With seemingly no regulatory accountability or safeguards in place to protect our communities from these drifting chemicals, it is no wonder landowners discussed their frustrations and emotional toll from witnessing these injuries every time they look out their windows, hike in a local state park, or simply drive through town.

### Recognize the Symptoms

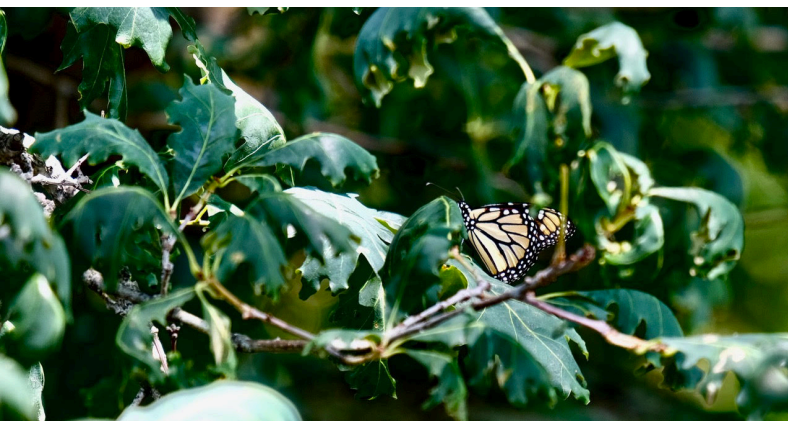
Drifting herbicide pollution directly impacts our climate and our ability to fight climate change. It poisons the food we grow and eat and the plants and trees around our homes, our children's schools, and parks. Trees with thickened, curled-cupped, and stunted leaves cannot function properly, and they are severely stressed. There are serious concerns about how injured vegetation is impacting invertebrates like moths, butterflies, and bees that need them for food. These same invertebrates are critical food for migratory birds, fish, and countless wildlife. We are already witnessing the declines in forest health that we feared would happen.

The tours we are leading with our partners will elevate the data we have collected in our Tree and Plant Health Monitoring Program and the reports we have written to sound the alarm far and wide. Together with our partners, which includes NGOs, landowners, land managers, and people from all walks of life, we will make our voices heard and draft legislation for the upcoming session that better protects our forests, prairies, food, and families from herbicide drift. In the next legislative session we will educate legislators and regulatory agencies and call for stronger protections and better enforcement. It is time our leaders step up and protect our air, water, environment, and health. //

## HEALING LAND THROUGH WATER QUALITY STANDARDS

Once every three years, the Illinois EPA is tasked by the Clean Water Act with reviewing and updating water quality standards for Illinois. This process is called the Triennial Review, and Prairie Rivers Network is working to provide input on this process to the Illinois EPA. If you read the article above, you will know that what is applied to our lands often ends up in unintended places including our air and rivers.

Many of our water quality standards in Illinois are not up-to-date with the US EPA's best standards, and we hope to change that. That is why we are using every tool in our toolbelt to help heal lands in Illinois. Through the Triennial Review, PRN and our partners will be calling on the IEPA to consider nutrient pollution, pesticide pollution, and many other new and emerging contaminants like PFAS. //



# INSPIRE CHANGE.

## A SUMMER OF EXTREMES

**This summer, we have experienced the impacts of climate change in its many forms here in Illinois: drought, wildfires, torrential rainfall, and extreme heat.**

**By Amanda Pankau**

In Illinois, we had the 9th driest June in 128 years of records, and by the end of June, severe drought impacted over half the state. Wildfires burning in Canada brought smoke to the Midwest causing extremely poor and unhealthy air quality, with Chicago becoming the city with the worst air quality on Earth for a day. June ended and July began with extreme precipitation and damaging storm events across much of Illinois, a pattern that is consistent with long-term changes. In fact, over the past 120 years, annual precipitation totals in Illinois have increased by five inches, and rainfall events have gotten more intense with the number of 2-inch rain days increasing by 40%. As I write this in late July, a heat wave that has been baking the southwest for weeks moves into the Midwest, with several days of heat indexes over 100°F forecasted.

### **It's Bad...**

While climate change is not solely to blame for this summer's weather (i.e. El Nino), we are seeing weather extremes that are only projected to get worse. According to the Illinois state climatologist, Trent Ford, as climate change intensifies, Illinois is expected to have warmer temperatures, extreme summer heat, prolonged droughts, and an overall increase in precipitation that often comes as heavy rain with longer dry spells.

### **...But We Have Reason to Hope!**

As you know, climate change, and its anticipated weather extremes, are caused by human-made emissions of carbon pollution and other greenhouse gasses. The US, and Illinois in particular, has made significant strides that will usher in

deep cuts to these emissions, largely thanks to state policies like Illinois' Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) and the August 2022 federal passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). As we approach the one-year anniversary of the IRA, a recent report found that the IRA and state climate bills will reduce emissions between 29-42% in 2030 compared to 2005 levels. While monumental and ambitious, without additional action, we are falling short of our Paris Agreement pledge to reduce emissions 50-52% by 2030.

We have work to do. We must continue to rally and advocate for legislative action and systemic change to slash emissions, mitigate the worst of climate change, and adapt to the unavoidable changes. We must also work to equitably implement the already pioneering new programs created by CEJA and the IRA.

Prairie Rivers Network is supporting communities in taking advantage of programs and funding opportunities to adopt clean energy, address legacy pollution, and increase climate resiliency. We are bringing to life policies that we fought to pass in CEJA, like the Energy Transition Community Grant program, that is bringing support to more than 50 coal communities to address the economic and social impacts of fossil fuel plant and coal mine closures. Through this program and upcoming clean energy workforce hubs across the state, Illinois is leading the way in showing how the transition away from coal can be just and equitable.

We continue to lead work on the cleanup of coal ash and abandoned mine lands, and we are ensuring that technologies like Carbon Capture and Storage do not harm communities and extend the life of polluting fossil fuel and ethanol plants. We are identifying and pursuing nature-based projects for our rivers that will create a more climate-friendly economy and help to sustain our local ecosystems.

Our work depends on you—in rallying the public, lobbying our elected leaders, and encouraging our own communities to take action on clean energy and climate resiliency. These are critical to the success of the collective work of mitigating and adapting to climate change. Are you ready to help? //

Air quality in Champaign, Illinois was in the unhealthy range at the end of June due to Canadian wildfires.



# THE QUINQUENNIAL FARM BILL:

## A QUIXOTIC EFFORT TO SAVE BIG AG

In Don Quixote, Cervantes writes, “fault lies not with the mob, who demands nonsense, but with those who do not know how to produce anything else.” The same can be said of Congress and the Farm Bill.

By Jeff Kohmstedt

In a way, the Farm Bill is nonsense. It is a mishmash, bloated, unwieldy, 1,000+ page piece of legislation that comes around once every five years ranging in areas of nutrition, conservation, rural development, crop insurance, energy, and others. It is debated and passed every five years with bipartisan support. The Farm Bill results in the status quo as both sides of the political spectrum stake out turf and things largely remain the same. The agriculture industry gets handouts to keep demand for fertilizers and pesticides high and the two-crop farming system unchanged. And Title IV of the Farm Bill, which covers nutrition and the SNAP Program, attempts to keep low-income families fed, especially important in the last three years with the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased cost of food.

### “Get Big or Get Out”

Every five years, the Farm Bill rears its ugly head, and the commodity groups (corn, soy, cotton, beef, pork, poultry, etc.) and chemical companies are there with sharpened knives to cut the biggest pieces of the pie. The Farm Bill came out of the Depression-era New Deal to level the playing field for farmers and provide them with a base income when market prices sank below production costs. It also started paying farmers to keep crops off the market to stabilize food prices for everyone. In the early post-war era, America truly did feed the world while countries recovered from years of conflict, and the Farm Bill helped feed a hungry world.

In the 1970s, how we farm fundamentally changed. Earl Butz, President Richard Nixon’s secretary of agriculture, is

quoted as saying that farmers should, “get big or get out” of the industry. The way the Farm Bill was implemented, it encouraged farmers to do away with smaller family farms in favor of larger, consolidated operations, concentrating more animals into smaller spaces and using every acre for production. Farm Aid of the 1980s was a reaction to this change in hopes of saving family farms that were getting squeezed out of the market by ever bigger farming operations. Farming in the 1990s fared no better with the 1996 Farm Bill and the Freedom to Farm Act dropping feed prices, and NAFTA encouraging ever larger farming operations.

### It’s an Oligopoly

Today, the oligopoly (a state of limited competition) of the agricultural industry has led to few options for farmers to work outside of the system. There are only four major meatpackers. Four grain processing firms. Four seed and chemical companies. And four fertilizers make up two thirds of sales. Big Ag controls all aspects of farming to the detriment of farmers and to our environment.

### What Can We Expect from Farm Bill 2023?

As we write this article, Congress is drafting the Farm Bill and sides are digging in. Reports indicate the House might test President Biden on his climate goals and the SNAP food assistance program which makes up 80% of the bill’s funding. In 2014, the Republican led House of Representatives tried removing nutrition programs from that Farm Bill, delaying passage for more than a year. Will that happen again?

Prairie Rivers Network will continue to advocate in Illinois and the nation’s capital for a Farm Bill that addresses the climate crisis through dedicated funding from the Inflation Reduction Act and conservation programs to help address inequity, water quality, habitat, and biodiversity loss. Either directly or indirectly, the Farm Bill has promoted growing corn and soybeans for ethanol and the use of pesticide intensive agriculture that is wiping out trees and wildlife. We cannot accept the status quo and must ensure that our next farm bill works for everyone, not just industry and the rich and powerful. //



## 2023 ANNUAL DINNER

Join us on September 22nd for this year's Annual Dinner at Pear Tree Estate! It will certainly be a special evening spent mingling with fellow PRN members and supporters as we celebrate another impactful year of protecting our water, healing our land, and inspiring change.

We will be "Celebrating our Rivers, Network & Future," and we are thrilled to be unveiling a new campaign that will... Stop! You will have to join us at the Annual Dinner to be the first to find out our big plans!

We will enjoy farm grazing tables filled with delicious, earth-friendly vegetarian options and a herb crusted grilled chicken carving station with sweet barbeque and Joe's mustard sauces and an array of cured meats. We will finish up the night on the patio with some good old fashioned s'mores. The wine and beer will be flowing, so be sure to designate your driver.

Find all the details and reserve your seats at:

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

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

**PRN ANNUAL DINNER**  
**SEPTEMBER 22, 2023**  
**PEAR TREE ESTATE**

## WELCOME STAFF!

PRN is staffing up this year, and we are excited to welcome Nina Struss as our new River Health and Resiliency Organizer! Nina advances nature-based solutions specific to river health in the Quad Cities region. She educates, engages, and activates the public and community leaders on the benefits of natural river, wetland, and floodplain functions and their impacts on the Quad Cities.

Previously, Nina worked as a Registered Dietitian and Intuitive Eating Counselor focusing on improving the overall health and wellness of the Quad Cities community through nutrition education, community presentations, public events, and media relations. We are excited to have Nina join the team!



Nina Struss

Welcome also to our summer intern Brayden Riesberg. Brayden comes from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he is getting his Bachelor's degree in Information Sciences. He is helping us organize and tag the thousands of photos we have accumulated over the decades. He has his work cut out for him!



Brayden Riesberg

## CLEAN WATER ACT (From page 3)

Currently, Illinois law only protects wetlands from state action. Wetlands on private property have, until now, been protected by the Clean Water Act. With those protections gone, the state must act quickly.

During his two terms, Governor Pritzker has responded quickly and forcefully when he felt that federal actions, or the lack thereof, presented a threat to Illinoisans. Until passage of the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022, the federal government had failed for years to tackle the climate crisis. But Gov. Pritzker's leadership ensured passage of the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, a landmark clean energy law that prepares Illinois' economy for the 21st century. Time and again, he has responded with swift legislation when he disagreed with actions taken by the federal government.

As in other recent Supreme Court rulings, the Sackett decision amounts to the Court putting responsibility on individual states to act. Prairie Rivers Network urges Governor Pritzker and the state legislature to do so now.

Over the next year, PRN will be leading the charge to ensure Illinois broadens its current, limited wetlands policy and applies it to all actions impacting wetlands in the state. In addition, Illinois should establish a major initiative to create new wetlands, funded by permits on new development.

By responding to the Court's decision, Governor Pritzker can again lead on an issue that is critically important for Americans—clean water. We can lament the outcome of the Sackett decision, or the Court's recent judicial philosophy, but we must respond through the processes available to us. By enacting state legislation to protect Illinois' water and wetlands, Pritzker can lead the nation on a path to advance water quality now and forever. //



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## GIVE MONTHLY

What does supporting PRN for the long haul look like? When you become a sustaining member, your monthly contributions never expire (unless you say so). You have peace of mind knowing that your donations reach us when we need them. Become a sustaining member and rack up those credit card benefits, or never worry about credit card expiration dates with an automatic bank debit contribution. It's a great way to guarantee your support of PRN helps us each and every month. Become a monthly donor today!

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

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