

Dear Friends,

We have made great progress the past few years to make Illinois a leader in meeting the climate change crisis head on through the Climate & Equitable Jobs Act. But our work is never done. We are gearing up to do the same work to address the water crisis impacting communities across Illinois with our Clean Water Forever campaign. While our commitment to protecting water has been ongoing across our many decades of work, we continue to see pollution levels rising in our waters.

With your partnership and support, this campaign will work to change the way Illinois thinks about and cares for its water at the scale that science and justice requires. We launched the Clean Water Forever campaign to achieve Illinois' ambitious climate and water goals and build climate resilience.

Please make a donation to support the Clean Water Forever campaign and Prairie Rivers Network today! Donations can be made by check via the remit envelope, online by visiting [www.prairierivers.org/forever](http://www.prairierivers.org/forever), or by scanning the code to the right.

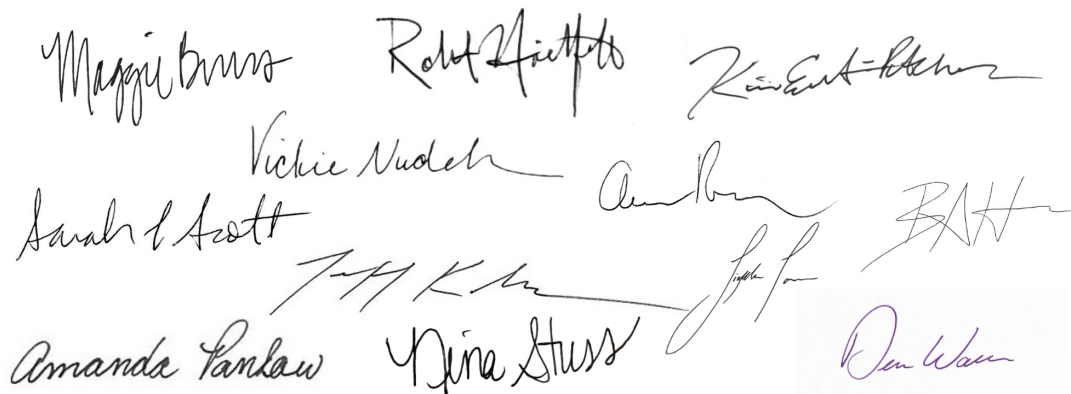
SCAN TO DONATE



THANK YOU!

Thank you,

*The staff of Prairie Rivers Network*



Maggi Bruns     Robt Hittels     Kim East-Brown  
Vickie Nudeln     Amber  
Sarah & Scott     JHK     JPH  
Amanda Tankaw     Nina Stuss     Dan Wilson

P.S. Prairie Rivers Network is a registered 501(c)(3) not-for-profit with the state of Illinois. Your donation is tax-deductible (Tax ID # 37-6085905). Your gift is needed to help protect water, heal land, and inspire change.



## CLEAN WATER FOREVER

By Brian Dolinar

This fall, Prairie Rivers Network (PRN) launched our Clean Water Forever campaign to sound the alarm about the emergency facing our rivers, lakes, and groundwater. Driven by unchecked pollution, particularly from industrial agriculture and legacy pollution from coal mining and decades of burning coal, Illinois faces a grave water crisis encompassing interwoven issues of water quality, quantity, equity, and access.

With each passing year, the threats continue to mount. We are experiencing the reality of a warming planet, with extreme weather, flooding, wildfires, and droughts all touching us here in Illinois. Recent Supreme Court rulings have weakened the Clean Water Act. Chemical ag runoff spills into our streams unchecked. From access to clean drinking water to access to recreation, Illinois has a tremendous amount of work to do to provide long-term solutions to our shared water security.

### Illinois, We Have a Problem!

Of the streams that Illinois EPA has assessed for water quality conditions from 2020–2022:

- 40% are too polluted to support aquatic life

- 62% are too polluted to support indigenous aquatic life
- 85% are too polluted to support swimming or direct human contact
- 100%. Yes, 100% are too polluted to support fish consumption

### The Opportunity

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to leverage historic funding from federal legislation like the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act and align those opportunities to advance Illinois' updated State Water Plan. At a scale like never before, Illinois has the potential to clean up legacy pollution from abandoned coal mines, deploy nature-based solutions to restore our rivers while providing critical habitat for wildlife, advance statewide wetlands protections, and update our infrastructure to enhance water quality for both rural and urban communities across the state. Illinois can become a clean water leader in the Midwest, benefitting all communities downstream to the Gulf of Mexico.

### The Solution—Clean Water Forever

That's why Prairie Rivers Network is launching Clean Water Forever, a campaign that aims to change the way Illinois thinks about and cares for its water. Starting in southern Illinois and working our way north, PRN will support downstream communities by listening to their concerns and helping to identify and implement locally-informed solutions and financial resources. Through these efforts, PRN will support communities as they build climate resiliency and advance their vision for the future.

Clean Water Forever starts with telling the truth about the water quality crisis in the Midwest and ends with finding long-term solutions to protect our communities.

The main principles for this campaign include:

**Quality:** Illinois must hold polluters accountable to clean up their mess and protect our right to clean water.

**Quantity:** Illinois must protect the long-term viability of its water supply, ensuring that aquifers and public water supplies are not depleted from agricultural irrigation and industrial withdrawals and are able to naturally recharge.

**Equity:** Illinois must address water rate and water quality disparities that disproportionately impact low income and marginalized communities across the state.

**Access:** Illinois must act to protect the public's right to access, use, and enjoy public waters.

Throughout this newsletter you will read how PRN will lead Illinois towards achieving clean water forever! //

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## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

### MAGGIE BRUNS

**“We must be bold. We must get loud. And we must push together for change like we’ve never done before.”**

Just as our rivers connect communities across Illinois and beyond, Prairie Rivers Network works to connect and activate people to protect waters, heal lands, and inspire change. As we kick off the next phase of our work together with PRN’s Clean Water Forever campaign, I write to share my deep gratitude and appreciation for your commitment to PRN.

As you will read throughout this newsletter, there are unprecedented opportunities available to address, mitigate and quite honestly begin to better manage the climate crisis, and similarly, there are historic federal investments available to improve water quality, too. Our team has retooled our efforts, we’ve expanded our team (and continue to grow!), and are excited to boldly go forward to tell the truth about the water crisis in Illinois and engage communities to find the right solutions to meet their local needs and values.

In closing out my first year as Executive Director, I’m incredibly thankful for the team we have in place, our dedicated Board of Directors, and to each and every one of you who make up our network. Our power is in our rich network of engaged members, scientists, farmers, landowners, small business owners, community leaders, and policy makers. I’m asking you all to join PRN in this new chapter of our work and get loud. Together we can address the challenges of tomorrow, but we need to start today. Thank you for investing your time, resources, and trust in PRN. //

#### **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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Intern

DEVIN WALKER  
Development Director

## WHY WE GIVE

We first became members with Prairie Rivers Network in 2004. At the time, our membership was connected to our love of the Middle Fork and Salt Fork Rivers where we spent many sunny afternoons.

More recently, we have increased our support of PRN as they enter this next chapter of their work. As farm owners, it’s important for us to be engaging in the conversation around climate change and how it is impacted by current agricultural practices. While the future might look scary at times, it’s PRN events and members that give me hope for the future of our waters and our state.



Today, I’m able to honor my mother as I channel my charitable giving towards causes that mean the most to the both of us. As PRN members, we can feel good about giving back to an organization that is working at the grassroots level to protect our waters today and for years to come. That is why we support PRN and Clean Water Forever.

Cathe Capel and Ken Smith  
PRN Members



# PROTECT WATER.

## CONNECTING THE DOTS TO PROTECT OUR WATER

For decades, Prairie Rivers Network has protected the rivers and streams of Illinois. As we turn a new page in our efforts—to more aggressively address the water crisis building in Illinois and around the country—we are expanding our strategies to more broadly address the systemic issues impacting our waters. Beyond water quality, expanding our work into water equity, quantity, and access will transform the way people think about and care for our water at a much larger scale.

For example, countless municipal water systems across Illinois contend with nutrient pollution and other harmful chemicals. The cost to clean up this pollution to provide communities with safe drinking water is pushed onto consumers through their monthly water bills. This is not right. When we link these two problems together, we connect the dots and can build power for long term solutions that meet the scale of the problem. Here are two upcoming examples of how you can join PRN's Clean Water Forever campaign and raise your voice.

### Win for the Middle Fork River

We celebrated a major win this summer when Dynegey agreed to a court settlement to clean up toxic coal ash along the Middle Fork River, restoring Illinois' only National Scenic River. For decades, the Vermilion Power Station had been dumping coal waste along the river, releasing a dangerous chemical soup that left a purple-orange sheen on the surface of the water. Dynegey will dig up approximately 3 million cubic yards of coal ash and move it to a landfill.



The Middle Fork of the Vermilion River during winter of 2022.

The settlement-mandated plan to remove the coal ash will be one of the first opportunities for the public to engage with Illinois' coal ash regulations, which are on track for a big year in 2024. Years of advocacy to clean up the damage from decades of coal-fired power culminated with the 2019 passage of Illinois' Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act. Now, almost a dozen proposed closure plans for coal ash dumps across the state are sitting on desks at the Illinois EPA, undergoing a lengthy review.

The Vermilion coal ash closure plan will be among the first to move to a public comment process, where the strength of the regulations will be tested. PRN fought to ensure a voice for the public was included in every step of our coal ash regulations, and we expect that 2024 will be busy with public hearings.

### Stopping Agricultural Pollution

After the recent release of the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy biennial report documenting increasing levels of agricultural pollution, PRN is raising the alarm and calling on elected officials to protect our water and hold polluters accountable. The report is released every two years as part of a plan by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and Illinois Department of Agriculture to monitor water quality.

The state agencies have set goals to reduce by 45% the rates of nitrate-nitrogen and phosphorus, with a short-term goal of reducing nitrogen by 15% and phosphorus by 25% by the year 2025. The most recent numbers show that Illinois is nowhere near these targets, but instead increasing the amount of nutrient pollution entering our waters, impacting not only Illinois communities, but every community from here to the Gulf of Mexico. We cannot simply send our pollution down the Mississippi River. Our leaders here in Illinois must be held accountable.

PRN's Clean Water Forever campaign will encourage the public and impacted communities to look upstream, raise their voice, and demand long term solutions to address the pollution poisoning our water. //

# HEAL LAND.

## EXPANDING TESTING FOR HERBICIDE DRIFT

By **Kim Erndt-Pitcher**

As we close out 2023 and look towards another year of ensuring all have access to healthy lands, clean air, and clean water forever, it is important for us to remember that all of our work is connected. We can't have clean water without healthy lands and clean air. Energy production, food and agricultural commodity production, mineral and fiber production and their disposal all impact the health of our land, air, and water. We also know that sediment and nutrients from agriculture and municipalities spill into our water supply.

Pesticide pollution comes in many forms, and one type, herbicide drift, threatens our water across the state. Drifting herbicides don't just land on trees, crops, and other plants. They can land anywhere, including homes, schools, hospitals, playgrounds, and bodies of water. It has been well documented that pesticides can travel long distances in the atmosphere. Herbicides have even been found in rain water at rates that can injure plants.

### Designed to be Water Soluble

Many pesticides, including herbicides, are designed to be water soluble so they can be transported through plant tissue. This also means that they can easily wash off plant

and soil surfaces and into water resources where they can harm aquatic life. The herbicide atrazine is widely used early in the spring for weed control, but it can also be used later in the growing season. As a result of its widespread use, it is one of the most frequently detected herbicides in drinking water resources across the country.

Neonicotinoids, common insecticides widely used in seed and chemical lawn treatment products, are known for their toxicity to bees; however, they too are water soluble and highly toxic to many aquatic species. In fact, neonicotinoids are considered one of the leading threats to aquatic life in US streams.

### Exempt from Pesticide Regulations


Just like the use of pesticides on lumber products, the use of pesticides on seeds is largely unregulated. Seeds coated with neonicotinoids and other pesticides are exempt from most federal pesticide regulations under a "treated article exemption." While thought to be an efficient use of pesticides, the economic value of using seed treatments has been challenged for years.

Neonicotinoids and other pesticides that a plant doesn't use stay in our environment until they degrade. Spring rains wash the majority of seed treatments into our soil, drain tiles, ditches, and nearby streams. As a result, many rural agricultural communities throughout the country have spikes of neonicotinoids in surface waters and even sometimes in treated drinking water during spring planting season.

### We're Expanding Our Testing

This is why our new Clean Water Forever campaign will expand our work to test for pesticides and other harmful chemicals like polyfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS, in several Illinois communities during the 2024 growing season. As we continue to push the state to implement its new water plan and expand surface and groundwater monitoring, it's important for groups like PRN to capture data that paints a clear picture of the pollution threatening our rivers, habitat, and communities.

Our pesticide and biodiversity work at PRN has important implications for water quality for all of Illinois. As we inform the public about these issues, we are also pushing for stronger laws and more enforcement to stop the use of these pesticides from causing harm. We are working to protect our biodiversity, our streams, and our community water supplies... forever. //



“Every tree sampled in Champaign-Urbana showed visible signs of injury, and lab tests confirmed the presence of herbicides in every sample. Herbicide pollution is threatening our trees and our community.”

Kim Erndt-Pitcher  
Prairie Rivers Network



# INSPIRE CHANGE.

## HUNTER LAKE, A \$250 MILLION BOONDOGGLE

### By Brian Dolinar

A plan by city officials in Springfield to develop Hunter Lake threatens to have a devastating environmental impact on local streams, forests, wetlands, prairie, agricultural land, and wildlife. Local residents will be on the hook for the \$250 million price tag if the plan goes through.

Hunter Lake was first proposed after a severe 18-month drought in the mid-1950s. City planners projected future population growth and sought to find a way to survive another drought without implementing water conservation efforts. Such a drought has not since been repeated, and the population today in Springfield is, in fact, shrinking. Still, the city persists with the project which today involves damming up a tributary of the Sangamon River to create a 2,500-acre reservoir.

### Reservoir or Recreation Area?

In order to build Hunter Lake, the city must be granted permits from the US Army Corps of Engineers and Illinois EPA. This has led to several environmental impact studies and public comment periods. Over the years, a movement to stop the proposed lake came together, with PRN providing scientific and technical support.

After three failed attempts at getting a permit, Springfield officials changed their argument claiming that Hunter Lake would serve a need for more recreational activities like boating, although most recognized nearby lakes such as the Sangchris Lake were underutilized. A survey conducted by the University of Illinois found that more than 60% of respondents were satisfied with recreational options, with many busy adults saying what kept them from participating in more outdoor activities was that they “do not have the time.”

### Water Need Evaporates

Proponents of Hunter Lake say it would provide Springfield with an additional 12 million gallons of water per day. Yet

the recent closure of three coal-fired power plants has put nine million gallons per day back into the existing water supply.

On September 25, 2023, PRN submitted its comments to the Army Corps of Engineers outlining the reasons why Hunter Lake is not in the public interest. It will likely take at least six months for a response.

“Every time they come up for an Army Corps permit, they say that water use is going to grow dramatically in the next 25 years,” says Clark Bullard, PRN board member, who helped author PRN’s public comments. “None of this has ever materialized. Use has been flat for 50 years. After those three power plants closed, their need for water totally evaporated, literally.”

The federal EPA weighed in by recommending the permit should be denied in a document that was obtained by the Springfield Sierra Club and leaked to the media in early November 2023.

### An Issue of Equity

The projected \$250 million cost of building the lake would likely be passed on to local Springfield residents whose rates could likely double if plans for Hunter Lake were to go through. Hunter Lake is an issue of equity that the people of Springfield cannot afford.

Proponents of Hunter Lake say a new recreational area would heighten Springfield’s appeal. A massive increase in water bills would likely do the opposite.

“Some Springfield officials,” Bullard surmised, “probably know that it’s a boondoggle, and they can’t afford it. They may just keep their mouths shut and wait for the Corps or EPA to kill it.”

The campaign to stop Hunter Lake is a story about perseverance. Victories can often take decades of work by advocacy groups like PRN and its members. There are hundreds of hours required to read documents, produce public comments, organize events, and educate the public. Your donations to PRN go directly to helping make a change! //



# CLEAN WATER FOREVER WITH CHRIS JONES

By Jeff Kohmstedt

November 2nd saw the launch of our statewide Clean Water Forever campaign from the Orpheum in Champaign. Chris Jones, author of *The Swine Republic*, captivated over 150 PRN members, board members, and the public with tales from his work toward clean water in Iowa. The event capped a whirlwind day for PRN with Jones appearing on Illinois Public Media's *The 21st Show* and other media interviews.

PRN Executive Director Maggie Bruns kicked off the evening with an introduction to the Clean Water Forever campaign and its four principles. (See page 1 for a detailed introduction to CWF!) Bruns concluded by connecting these principles with the clean water writing and advocacy Chris Jones has fought for in Iowa.

**Get Big or Get Out**

“Because we live in the Corn Belt does not mean we should have to endure lower quality water than people in other parts of the country,” Jones said during his remarks. “We need to have some serious discussions in this country about how we’re funneling tax dollars to agriculture to get environmental outcomes. We need diverse farming. But until the industry is ready to go there, I say we need laws. This is a question of power. Our water is polluted because industry has the power. The citizens don’t have the power on this. If we want our water to get better, we have to claim the power. We have to get the power.”

PRN’s Robert Hirschfeld then took the stage to make an impassioned call for action in support of the CWF campaign. “PRN is committed to going from Cairo to Chicago to demand and deliver cleaner water. Now and forever,” Hirschfeld said. “We will need your help. We will need you to meet with lawmakers. To call them, to send emails. To write letters to the editor. To post on social media. And, I won’t be coy about it, this takes money. We are committed to the work, and I know many of you are committed to us.”

A question and answer session explored the causes and solutions to the Midwest’s water crisis. The topic of clean water in the heart of corn and soybean country requires talking about the hard truths, that industrial agriculture is polluting our water, and that our leaders in Springfield and Washington D.C. are letting it happen.

We want to thank all of you who joined us for the launch of the CWF campaign! And a special shout out to Chris Jones for helping kick off the campaign in such an engaging way! //

**IF YOU MISSED THE EVENT, YOU’RE IN LUCK!**

**WATCH THE FULL LENGTH VIDEO AT:**

**[YOUTUBE.COM/PRAIRIERIVERS](https://www.youtube.com/prairierivers)**



## CHRIS JONES ON ILLINOIS’ WATER QUALITY CRISIS

*We asked Chris Jones to write on the water quality crisis in Illinois, and here’s a preview of what you’ll find on the PRN blog.*

After decades of enduring polluted water, residents of Illinois and other Corn Belt states deserve to know if the state strategies, and especially the voluntary portion of each that targets agricultural pollution, are viable going forward such that water quality can be improved and maintained. It’s important to recognize that the state strategies are aligned with water quality objectives in the Gulf of Mexico and were never intended to address issues such as aquatic life and drinking water supply affecting populations near the source of nutrient pollution.

**[READ MORE AT PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG/CHRIS-JONES](https://www.prairierivers.org/chris-jones)**



## THE WINNERS ARE...

This year's winner of the River Steward award has spent his life in service to others. PRN's River Steward Award



**Gary Swick**

celebrates the important work of an individual who inspires us with their on-the-ground efforts to protect Illinois' rivers and streams. This year's award goes to Gary Swick of Elgin. Swick has dedicated his life to preparing the next generation to protect the Fox River Watershed in northern Illinois.

From stream monitoring and guiding nature walks to organizing river and shoreline cleanups, Swick fosters a deeper connection between people and the natural world. As the volunteer Fox River Water Quality Monitoring Director and teacher, he has been responsible for over 40,000 students collecting water-quality data in their local streams. Thousands more have been involved in 30 years of cleanups. It was a great honor to award Swick at our Annual Dinner in September for his years of service!

The recipients of the 2023 Outstanding Public Servant Award are recognized for their

work to open the Rise Community Market, a cooperative grocery store in Illinois' southernmost city, Cairo. For the last seven years, the Cairo community has been without a grocery store, limiting access to fresh, affordable, and nutritious food. In June, the Rise Community Market opened its doors to the community and has begun to address food insecurity, environmental injustice, and disparities in food access worsened by climate change.

The award co-recipients are Steven Tarver and Marcella Woodson, co-founders of Men of Power-Women of Strength and current co-op board members, Sean Park with the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, and John Shadowens with the University of Illinois Extension.

Thank you to all who sent nominations for our awards this year! //

## WE'RE GROWING!

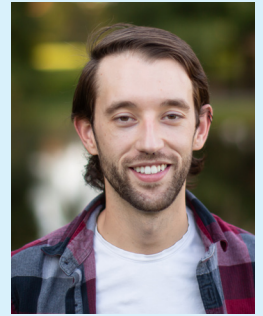
PRN is excited to welcome three new staff members since our last newsletter edition!

Devin Walker joined the PRN team as the new Development Director. After growing up in Tolono and graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he spent time in Austin, Texas and Chicago before turning his sights back home. Prior to joining PRN, Devin's experiences include fundraising and community building for several direct service organizations focusing on issues of homelessness, health and wellness, and family welfare services. He works alongside our members, leadership, and corporate and community partners to secure funding to sustain PRN's vital work across the state.

Anthony Henson is PRN's new Rural Energy Organizer. For over ten years, he worked as a community economic developer in multiple roles working for county government, a regional planning commission, and community-based organizations. He is also a veteran of the US Navy. As the Rural Energy Organizer, Anthony works throughout the various central and southern Illinois electric cooperative footprints, concentrating on increasing the capacity of rural grassroots groups to organize and support local climate leaders.

Jizelle Torres joins our team as our new intern, having recently graduated from the University of Illinois this spring with a degree in Earth, Society, and Environmental Science. Jizelle has been contributing to our social media presence and doing research for various PRN programs. Additionally, she plans to broaden our outreach efforts to include the University of Illinois community and other young, aspiring environmentalists.

Welcome to the team Devin, Anthony, and Jizelle! //



**Devin Walker**



**Anthony Henson**



**Jizelle Torres**



**PRN Staff with Woodson**



**Shadowens, Edwards,  
Tarver, and Park**





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# CELEBRATE, HONOR, AND REMEMBER

Honorary and Memorial gifts are a meaningful way to celebrate, honor, or remember a loved one, relative, friend, or colleague while supporting PRN's mission to protect water, heal land, and inspire change. In addition to a nature inspired card, your gift will serve as a reminder that you and your tribute are standing up to protect Illinois' waters.

Cards for tribute gifts received before Wednesday, December 20 will be delivered before the end of the year. Cards for tribute gifts received on Thursday, December 21 or after will be mailed on January 3, 2024. Thank you for your understanding and continued support of PRN!

For any questions, please contact Devin Walker, Development Director, at (217) 344-2371 x203.

\$1,000    \$500    \$250    \$100    Other \_\_\_\_\_

This gift is in honor of: \_\_\_\_\_

This gift is in memory of: \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like PRN to notify your honoree or loved one of your gift? Please provide their name and address below, and we will send them a card without revealing the amount.

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