

CLEAN ENERGY TRANSITION HAS ARRIVED IN ILLINOIS

By Amanda Pankau

Prairie Rivers Network, our members, and countless advocates in Illinois helped to pass the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) in 2021. Paired with federal climate laws, the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), we have laid the groundwork for transforming our energy sector from water polluting, planet warming fossil fuels, to clean energy. While these state and federal laws were the first step to systemic change, much of the critical work in the fight against climate change happens at the community level where innovative policies are implemented. We are working at the forefront of the energy transition. Coal facilities are closing, pollution is being cleaned up, and clean energy projects are being built. Let's delve into some inspiring Illinois success stories of communities that are spearheading transformative change to fight against climate change and advance clean energy.

IT'S A NO-BRAINER. ANY SMALL BUSINESS OWNER MUST ABSOLUTELY LOOK INTO THIS.

ALTO VINEYARDS POWERS GRAPEVINES WITH SOLAR

In the second half of 2023 alone, more than 200 Illinois farms and rural small businesses received the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) grant for renewable energy projects. While the projects are small, the impact for a rural business or farm is great, and collectively the REAP grant is expanding clean energy and lowering emissions. We are actively working to make sure

this IRA funding reaches regenerative farms and small businesses in unserved and coal communities.

One of the recipients in southern Illinois was Alto Vineyards, the oldest winery in Illinois, run by three generations of the Renzaglia family. Karen Renzaglia, Owner of Alto Vineyards said, "I think going solar has been one of the best things we've done in years. In addition to federal money, Illinois has the best incentives in the country. It's a no-brainer. Any small business owner absolutely must look into this."

SCHOOLS HAVE A BRIGHT GREEN FUTURE

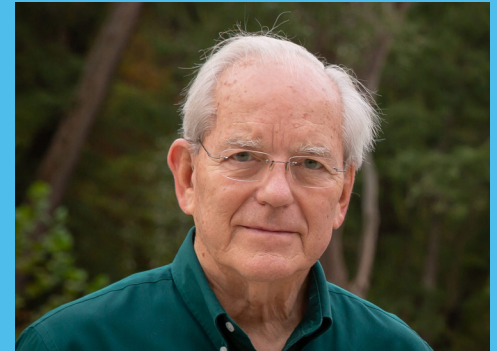
Schools are perfect places to adopt new clean energy technologies that provide better health for students, cost savings, career opportunities, and of course, big environmental benefits! There are 33 school districts in Illinois that have received US EPA rebates and grants to purchase electric school buses. In particular, Williamsfield Schools in Knox County is developing a pioneering approach where their US EPA funded electric buses will also be a part of a school microgrid with more solar and battery storage. Through Williamsfield's leadership and a Department of Energy grant, similar microgrid projects will be developed at over 15 other Illinois schools. We are working directly with several schools in southern Illinois that will be among the first to take advantage of a new CEJA school energy assessment program from Ameren. This work will empower schools with a roadmap to their energy future with lower emissions and cheaper electricity bills.

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Aerial view of Alto Vineyards in Alto Pass, IL from Straight Up Solar.

“THE RIVERS ARE THE PLACE WHERE NATURE STILL EXISTS.”

Bruce Hannon



Bruce Hannon, the founder of Prairie Rivers Network, passed away on Sunday, February 18, 2024. Bruce's accomplishments are too numerous to recount in full, but among other things, he was a distinguished Professor Emeritus of Geography, an environmental visionary, a community leader, an expert clocksmith, a beloved husband, father, grandfather and great grandfather, and a deeply kind and generous man who never stopped working to make this place better for all who live here.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTES MAGGIE BRUNS



“ IN THIS PIVOTAL MOMENT, ILLINOIS COMMUNITIES HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE OUR FUTURE, AND PRN IS THE RIGHT ORGANIZATION TO LEAD THE WAY.

2023 was an exciting and pivotal time for Illinois and Prairie Rivers Network. Over the last year, we've successfully grown and begun to diversify our team, expanded our programs and tactics, deepened engagement with our network, and raised our collective voices even louder to protect Illinois' rivers, habitat, and communities.

With the recent passing of PRN's founder and community leader, Bruce Hannon, it feels like we are walking in the footsteps of a giant. These are big shoes to fill, but his legacy is inspiring me to hold the torch a bit higher. Just looking around the community and hearing tales of Bruce's work over the years, it's a clear reminder of the power of community to work towards a common vision for the future. That's what the team at PRN is doing day in and day out.

The interconnected crises impacting our water, lands, biodiversity, and climate are growing more urgent by the day. These issues require systemic, landscape-wide solutions. We cannot simply solve one crisis without thinking through its impacts on the others, and none of these actions will happen without critical input from communities. With decades of experience working in downstream communities throughout Illinois, PRN has built trust and respect with community members – an essential component to driving change.

Our team and our network are stronger than ever, and well-positioned to advance historic climate legislation and our new equity-centered State Water Plan, all while cleaning up legacy pollution and raising the public will to demand better, as you will read throughout this newsletter. In this pivotal moment, Illinois communities have an opportunity to change our future, and PRN is the right organization to lead the way. Your trust, feedback, and investments until now have made it all possible, and we are thrilled to have you working alongside us! So, here's to Bruce and all the work our network will accomplish in 2024 and beyond! //

WHY I GIVE... PATSY HIRSCH



Seven years ago, I learned that our property was being damaged by herbicide pollution from both lawn and field applications of two common herbicides, 2,4-D and dicamba, among others. In the beginning I only focused on the damage to our own old oak trees, native plants, and vegetable gardens as I filed complaint after complaint with the Illinois Department of Agriculture, with no relief. I then became aware of how widespread the damage was throughout our entire neighborhood, our community, and beyond. Once I learned to identify the damage, I could no longer “unsee it,” as it was everywhere I looked. I knew then that I had to take action and get involved in bringing awareness to the issue. It was recommended to me to reach out to Prairie Rivers Network (PRN) to get further involved and to learn more. The more I learned, the more damage I saw. I began hosting tours of our property, also known as “ruining tours,” to teach others how to identify damage and show the severity of this issue. The goal was to give people the tools they needed to make a difference, whether that be through legislation or how they treat their own property (or both), and encourage them to share what they learned with others, furthering change. Since my first contact with PRN's Director of Ecological

“ I'VE WITNESSED PRN'S RELENTLESS PURSUIT TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT AND THEIR ABILITY TO ENGAGE COMMUNITIES IN THEIR WORK.

Health, Kim Erndt-Pitcher, I have witnessed PRN's relentless pursuit to protect the environment and their ability to engage communities in their work. PRN's work is highly crucial because it's about more than an individual yard, park, or farmers' crops, or money for that matter; it's about the future of the communities we love, the trees that we love and need, the air that we breathe, and the water that is required for life. Without this, we, all living things, have nothing. As a member, I'm able to provide vital support to drive PRN's mission, volunteer and serve as a resource for my community, and create change for future generations, like my grandchildren, including yours. I support Prairie Rivers Network because they are creating change for all communities across Illinois, as they provide examples for others beyond our state, to protect the environment, before it's too late. //

PROTECT WATER

PRN'S 2024 SPRINGFIELD PRIORITIES

By Andrew Rehn

The Spring 2024 legislative session is upon us! Here is what Prairie Rivers Network is tracking and supporting in Springfield:

PROTECTING WETLANDS

Wetlands are one of Illinois' greatest natural assets, but they are currently at risk. Last year, the US Supreme Court eliminated Clean Water Act protections for millions of acres of wetlands across the country.

- HB5386/SB3669: Restores wetlands protections in Illinois (Rep. Moeller and Sen. Ellman).

CLEAN WATER FOREVER

Water is essential to life, and PRN is tracking several bills that may impact clean water for future generations.

- SB2743: Requires the State Water Plan Task Force to identify critical water issues, develop recommendations, and report findings to the public (Sen. Ellman).
- SB3450: Establishes maximum levels of contaminants in drinking water (Sen. Simmons).
- SB2705: Prohibits the sale and distribution of specific products containing intentionally added PFAS, also known as "forever chemicals" beginning 2025. By 2032, all other products containing PFAS will be banned, except for those that cannot be manufactured without these chemicals (Sen. Fine).

ENERGY DEMOCRACY FOR CO-OPS & MUNIS

Over one million Illinoisans get their electricity from a rural electric cooperative (co-op) or municipal utility (muni). Unfortunately, their ratepayers do not have the same access to many clean energy benefits, including those created by CEJA, as customers of the major utilities like ComEd and Ameren. The munis and coops are far more likely to be invested in fossil fuels, and their ratepayers have little say in the matter.

- HB5021: Increases democratic transparency and ratepayer engagement for munis and co-ops (Rep. Yang-Rohr).
- HB5315: Creates a "Solar Bill of Rights" for muni and co-op customers to gain the benefits of solar energy (Sen. Didech).

STUDENT LEADERSHIP ON CLIMATE

Student-led environmental groups at the University of Illinois have a long record of pushing their university to be more sustainable and climate friendly.

- HB5268: Requires the University to divest the University of Illinois System and the UI Foundation from the fossil fuel industry (Rep. Guzzardi).

RIVER ACCESS

Our rivers are just that — our rivers. Prairie Rivers Network is working to pass new legislation that protects our access to rivers.

- HB4708: Affirms the public's right to use all public waterways capable of supporting canoes and kayaks, while also addressing the concerns of private land owners located adjacent to public waters (Rep. Yang-Rohr).

PESTICIDES

Prairie Rivers Network has spent years sounding the alarm about pesticide drift, which causes widespread injury to trees, crops, and private gardens. Pesticide drift not only harms our precious oaks and native species (plants and animals alike!) but also poses unknown health threats to our children. The Illinois legislature is considering multiple bills that would be first steps in tackling the pesticide problem:

- HB4932: Protects children at schools and parks by requiring notice of pesticide applications within half a mile of these areas (Rep. Faver Dias).
- HB4956: Bans the use of ester (highly volatile) formulations of 2,4-D (Rep. Mussman).
- HB5018: Imposes higher fines and penalties when pesticide applications injure trees (Rep. Hirschauer).
- HB5075: Adds 2,4-D and all formulations of dicamba to "Restricted Use Pesticide" list (Rep. Douglass).
- HB5390: Bans the use of dicamba (Rep. Syed).
- SB3519: Bans the use of treated seeds for ethanol production before they become a problem for Illinois (Sen. Villa).
- SB3342: Requires 24-hour notice before spraying in rights-of-way, even on private property (Sen. McClure).

MORATORIUM ON CARBON DUMPING

Due to our state's unique geology and an influx of federal incentives, Illinois could become ground zero for carbon capture and storage (CCS), and the state is unprepared to protect us from this growing threat.

- HB4835/SB3441: Places a moratorium on carbon pipelines and gives the state time to develop necessary safeguards on carbon capture and storage (Rep. Moeller and Sen. McClure).

HEAL LAND

ZOMBIE COAL MINES – A LOOMING THREAT

By Jizelle Torres and Amanda Pankau

Less than 30 miles south of Champaign, rust orange water flows in the roadside ditch along U.S. Route 36. This polluted, acidic water is flowing off an unreclaimed “Zombie Coal Mine.” The Murdock Mine in Douglas County was last mined in the 1990s, well after the passage of the 1977 federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA). The law put into place requirements that hold coal companies responsible for clean up of these “modern-era” mines, a process called reclamation. Modern-era mines are in contrast to the pre-law, “Abandoned Mine Lands,” that were mined before SMCRA went into effect. The requirements on modern mines include bonding; a financial guarantee provided by the mine to be used for reclamation. Companies are required to conduct reclamation shortly after mining is completed.

Murdock Mine is an example of a modern-era mine where the law has fallen short, reclamation has gone terribly wrong, and polluted water still flows from the site today. Stories similar to Murdock Mine, involving coal bankruptcies, ongoing Clean Water Act violations, insufficient reclamation bond funds, and shirked reclamation responsibilities, are occurring across the nation’s coal producing states. These problems are worsening. SMCRA’s reclamation assurances don’t function well as the coal industry declines. For example, enforcement mechanisms, such as fines and denial of new permit applications, have little impact on coal companies in or nearing bankruptcy.



Coal mining is inactive at Murdock Mine, but reclamation efforts have stalled.

Our environmental partners in Appalachia have coined the term “Zombie Mine” to describe unreclaimed modern-era coal mines. A 2024 report by Appalachian Citizens Law Center found that 40% of active coal mines in Kentucky haven’t produced coal in at least three years, some for over a decade. Evidence suggests that the companies are avoiding reclamation responsibilities by remaining active or idle, instead of closing. A 2021 analysis by Appalachian Voices estimated the actual cost of outstanding reclamation on over 600,000 acres in seven eastern coal mining states is between \$7.5 to \$9.8 billion. The available bonds in those states totalled only \$3.8 billion. There are countless examples where unexpected water quality

problems arise and bond amounts are not sufficient to clean up the problem.

In Illinois, the subject of modern-era mine reclamation has not been extensively studied. As of 2022, an estimated 32,500 acres of current coal mines in Illinois required cleanup, with only 6,600 acres partially reclaimed. A single company, Indemnity National Insurance



Acidic water pollution flows off of the Murdock Mine into a US Route 36 ditch.

Company, covers 68% of all reclamation bonds in Illinois. Indemnity is also the largest single provider of coal reclamation bonds nationally, providing nearly \$2 billion in bonds for mining companies in at least 11 states. The bankruptcy of even one large coal company could jeopardize the financial health of Indemnity, impacting the operation and reclamation of many other mines.

In response to the Zombie Mine problem, PRN joined over 50 other organizations in support of a new federal policy platform aimed at reforming SMCRA to ensure the adequate and timely clean-up of modern-era coal mines. The Zombie Mine platform outlines changes that would:

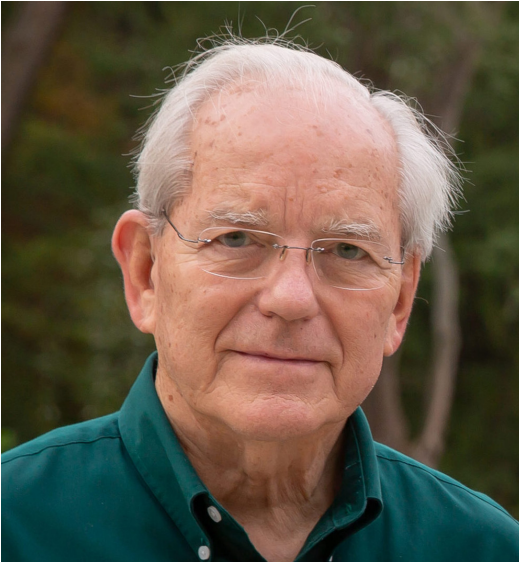
- Establish a new system of financial assurances for reclamation and provide reform for existing bonding practices.
- Require more timely reclamation and ensure compliance with water monitoring and Clean Water Act requirements until reclamation is complete.
- Close loopholes that allow companies to transfer permits and shirk reclamation responsibility through bankruptcies.
- Strengthen mine closure planning requirements and public engagement.

PRN thanks our partners in Appalachia for leading this work. We remain committed to supporting Illinois coal communities and advocating for policies that prioritize environmental stewardship, public health, and economic resilience. Visit ZombieMines.org to learn more. //

INSPIRE CHANGE

THE LEGACY OF BRUCE HANNON

By Robert Hirschfeld



Bruce Hannon from an interview on PRN's history at Allerton Park.

Bruce dedicated his life to fostering environmental consciousness and protecting Illinois' natural treasures, including Allerton Park and the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. His passion for advocacy led him to found multiple organizations including The Committee on Allerton Park (later becoming Prairie Rivers Network) and The Land Conservation Foundation. Through his tireless efforts, he nurtured a sense of place among the community, instilling in new generations the great responsibility of environmental stewardship. All of us who spend time in and appreciate Illinois' rivers, woods, prairies, and natural landscapes owe a great debt to Bruce Hannon and his wife, Patricia, who passed on in 2022.

Bruce's legacy is one of enduring inspiration. His teachings, values, and the organizations he founded will continue to guide those who take up his mantle and work at building a society and culture that respects and coexists with the natural world. As we mourn his passing, let us also celebrate a life well-lived, a life that left an indelible mark on the landscape and hearts of those who were fortunate enough to learn from and stand alongside this remarkable man.

In that spirit of celebration, we'd like to share excerpts from a few remembrances of Bruce written by members of the Prairie Rivers Network community. You can read them in full at [prairierivers.org/BruceHannon //](https://prairierivers.org/BruceHannon//)

COMMUNITY STORIES:

The moment of decision came one night while standing in the shower. I asked myself, "How did I ever get mixed up with this Hannon guy?" . . . I had spoken truth to power, and power barked back. Bruce said it's ok. I was about to get married and planning to have children. I thought of the quotation that Bruce put on the letterhead of his Committee on Allerton Park: This generation will decide if something untrammelled and free remains as testimony for those who follow. The decision was made – standing in the shower.

There was no turning back, no regrets.

CLARK BULLARD

My bur oak sprouts grew from acorns shed by trees around the Harding Band Building, or so Bruce Hannon told me. He collected them, tended them in UI greenhouses over the first winter, and then put them up for adoption (as he termed it) by the hundred. Bruce asked recipients to keep him informed of the progress of his bountiful Quercus progeny. I hope many did so. My communications were regrettably few, mostly reports on three early trees that now reach the canopy. I wish I had given Bruce a fuller accounting. He deserved to know what he was leaving behind.

ERIC FREYFOGLE

CONT. CLEAN ENERGY TRANSITION HAS ARRIVED IN ILLINOIS



Superintendent Tim Farquer gives PRN's Amanda Pankau a tour of Williamsfield's new electric school bus fleet.

ADDRESSING PAST HARMS AND POLLUTION

Coal communities have long powered the nation's economy, but they have also paid a price. In these places, miners have lost their lives in staggering numbers and communities have sacrificed their land, water, and air. Yet the coal economy's profits have been reaped primarily by out of state companies. Now, the closures of coal plants and mines come at a significant economic and social cost to these communities.

For the second year, we are working hand-in-hand with coal community leaders to help them take advantage of CEJA's Energy Transition Community Grant Program. These grants help replace lost tax revenue to provide critical community services and new economic opportunities. We also continue to advocate for coal ash clean up, and we successfully passed policies to fund abandoned mine land reclamation. Unprecedented federal funding will provide Illinois \$75 million per year for the reclamation of abandoned mines over 15 years. This funding will provide communities with jobs to get the work done, cleaner water, and reclaimed land that is ready for new life.

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

As we navigate the complexities of climate change, these success stories serve as inspiration for what can be achieved through collective determination and political will. However, the journey is far from over. Continued advocacy and community engagement are essential to accelerate the transition towards a cleaner, more resilient planet. //



INSPIRING COMMUNITY ACTION THROUGH ART

Late last year we launched our Clean Water Forever campaign — an effort to change the way Illinois thinks and acts to protect its water for the long term. With that announcement, we boldly committed to educate the public and raise the alarm on agricultural pollution's impact on our water, soil, communities, and even our beloved trees. For the month of April, the Champaign-Urbana community will kick off the Save Our Trees coalition's community awareness campaign. As I write, our team is hard at work planning creative activities and events bringing the community together to stop one particularly troubling pollution source — herbicide pollution — that's harming trees across the Midwest.

Over the coming weeks, PRN and a new network of artists and community members will join forces to help visualize this problem. We will be placing Save Our Trees yard signs, posters, art, and tying burlap ribbons around trees across town to build awareness and mobilize our community to act. But we aren't stopping there! Teaming up with artists for the Boneyard Arts Festival,



PRN will host two exhibits that are certain to move hearts and minds. One is a community art activation at Carle Park where we sampled trees last summer that contained residues of multiple harmful herbicides. It's important to note that the Urbana Park District is not using these chemicals in their parks and they continue to be a vocal leader in the effort to address this urgent issue. These trees are suffering from herbicides that have drifted to the park from surrounding agricultural farms and neighbors who use chemical lawn treatments. Finally, we are hosting a Save Our Trees benefit concert with Chicago-based artist Nathan Graham at the Rose Bowl Tavern in Urbana on Arbor Day, April 26th, to unite our community around this cause and celebrate our collective power. You're all invited! Check out our website to get your ticket.

These new creative strategies will help us expand our reach and mobilize people to tackle this colossal problem threatening our future. We invite you to become part of this effort. Check out prairierivers.org/saveourtrees for more ways to get involved. //

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WELCOME TO THE TEAM

PRN continues to scale our work and our team to meet this exciting moment. And make no doubt about it, the investment of our members and funders is powering this exciting growth, so thank you for all your support. We are thrilled to introduce you to our newest staff members who joined the team in January!



Jizelle Torres, who initially started at Prairie Rivers Network as an intern, begins this year as our new Climate and Energy Program assistant. After recently graduating from the University of Illinois this past spring with a degree in Earth, Society, and Environmental Science, Jizelle has focused her efforts in the fields of coal ash and modern era mines, while also spending time navigating her role in the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition. Additionally, she plans to broaden our outreach efforts to include the University of Illinois community and other young, aspiring environmentalists.

Randa Watts joins our PRN team as Clean Water Organizer. She plans to build capacity and resiliency in rural southern Illinois communities through state and federal funding opportunities. Originally from Nebo, Illinois, she understands the need for community-led projects in disadvantaged areas. She served in the Illinois Air National Guard before graduating from the University of Illinois Springfield in 2021. In her free time, Randa enjoys hiking, camping, and gardening.

Silas Gilklay is PRN’s new Climate and Water Program Assistant. Silas recently graduated from Augustana College with a Bachelor of Arts in Public Health and Environmental Studies. He briefly worked with World Relief-Quad Cities on a resettlement program before joining PRN. With his background in public health, he is eager to advocate for communities impacted by ag pollution and the loss of wetlands. Additionally, Silas wants to use his expertise in visual storytelling to bring attention to clean water issues in Illinois.

Madelyn Witruk started her journey with PRN through assisting with graphic design projects on a freelance basis and joined the team officially in 2024 as Communications and Engagement Specialist. For the past three years she has run a graphic design and water-based screen printing studio. With a passion for creating spaces for artists and designers in the community, she has also volunteered with CUDO, PechaKucha Night CU, and has organized art markets for local makers. In her spare time, Madelyn enjoys cooking, learning new artistic mediums, and spending time outside.

GOOD LUCK, JEFF!



We would like to wish Jeff Kohmstedt, PRN’s Communications Specialist, a fond farewell and best wishes! Jeff moved from Prairie Rivers Network in January 2024 to be the Marketing and Communications Specialist for UIUC’s National Center for Supercomputing Applications. After seven years of shepherding PRN’s communications and outreach strategies (shall we say “herding cats”?), we already miss his sharp wit and creative ideas around the office. Jeff was instrumental in the creation of our April Fool’s “Scream Pillow” video several years ago, and in the success of our Wild & Scenic Film Festivals around Illinois. He kept us always “on deadline” for our print and email newsletters, keeping us in touch with our network and beyond! Thank you, Jeff, for keeping us moving and relevant! We will miss you.



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Thank you to our Business & Community Sponsors who help drive PRN's mission and connect our members!



We thank our 2023 Business and Organization members for their generous support that helps drive our mission forward. Support from these organizations are key to engaging our members and supporting communities across Illinois to protect water, heal land, and inspire change.

To see how your business or organization can get involved with PRN, please contact Devin Walker at dwalker@prairierivers.org.

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