

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: HERBICIDE DRIFT IN ILLINOIS

This summer, after more than six years of traveling around Illinois evaluating herbicide damage, Prairie Rivers Network released *Hidden in Plain Sight*, a report that is the culmination of our research.

**“NOWHERE IS SAFE FROM
CHEMICAL TRESSPASS.”**

The report found that trees are dying, gardens are being threatened, and children are exposed to drifting herbicides across rural and urban Illinois. Herbicide drift, primarily from the agricultural industry, is damaging wild and cultivated plants and trees, threatening human health, and impairing our ability to adapt to climate change.

“Nowhere is safe from chemical trespass,” said Kim Erndt-Pitcher, Director of Ecological Health at Prairie Rivers Network. “Herbicide drift demonstrates a disregard for property rights. Again and again, trees and plants on public land, private land, in parks, schoolyards, homes,

gardens, and forests are being injured by drifting herbicides. Our current system for preventing harm from pesticide drift is not working. Illinois needs to do better.”

Prairie Rivers Network, through its Tree and Plant Health Monitoring Program launched in 2018, has been studying symptoms of herbicide drift and damage to non-target broadleaf plants and trees across Illinois.

Testing was conducted over six years at 280 sites in more than 40 counties across Illinois. The findings show widespread symptoms of injuries and an alarming decline in the health of trees.

Historically, the vast majority of this work has been funded by our members – people like you, who are concerned about the damage to our ecosystem.

“Conventional wisdom tends to dismiss pesticide drift as controlled, sporadic, or inconsequential,” said Martin Kemper, a

**“HERBICIDE DRIFT HAS
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GARDENING.”**

co-author of the report and retired Illinois Department of Natural Resources scientist. “This report conducted in places it matters — gardens, backyards, schoolyards, parks, and natural areas — shows that such drift is pervasive and insidious.”

Stories about the impact of herbicide drift have been shared by public land managers, private landowners, and outdoor enthusiasts. Their voices are included in the report.

“Herbicide drift has taken the joy from gardening,” says Prairie Rivers Network member Patsy Hirsch of Kane County.

OVERVIEW OF MONITORING EFFORTS (2018-2023):

Total Sites Monitored: 280 unique sites

- **Sites with Symptoms:** 279 sites (99.6%)
- **Repeat Visits:** 143 sites visited two or more years; 65 sites visited four or more years
- **Total Monitoring Instances:** 679 times
- **Symptoms Documented:** 677 instances (99.7%)
- **Symptom-Free Sites:** None since 2019

HERBICIDE RESIDUE ANALYSIS:

Tissue Samples Collected: 127 samples

- **Samples with Detectable Herbicide Levels:** 90%
- **Total Herbicide Residues Detected:** 220 residues from 11 different herbicides

KEY FINDINGS:

- **Annual Plant Injury:** Drift injuries recorded each year at nearly every site with multiple visits (142 of 143 sites).
- **Post Oak Hit Again and Again:** The state record post oak experienced at least 15 exposure events over five years (average of three per year).
- **Drift Event Source Identification:** Confidently identified potential sources for 545 drift events at 192 locations. Of those, 82% of observed distances exceeded 310 feet, 50% exceeded 500 feet and 42% exceeded 1,000 feet.
- **Sites More than a Mile from Source:** All six sites located more than a mile from any potential source had detectable pesticide residues.

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“We have made the painful decision to forgo harvest of our garden vegetables due to repeated herbicide exposures from the chemical lawn applications in our neighborhood. You cannot unsee it once you know how to identify herbicide damage symptoms.”

“YOU CANNOT UNSEE IT ONCE YOU KNOW HOW TO IDENTIFY HERBICIDE DAMAGE SYMPTOMS.”

The Bluestem Hall Nature School, a nature-based preschool in rural Urbana, shares space with the adjacent Barnhart Prairie Nature Preserve. The school and preserve are surrounded by farm fields, and the students are frequently exposed to pesticides while outside.

“Our nature-based program is designed to cultivate magical, respectful, and wondrous connections between children and their natural environment. How can we do this if we are literally running indoors to escape chemical drift? It raises the question — who has the rights to air quality? And the answer is clearly not in favor of our smallest citizens,” said Abbie Frank, executive director of Bluestem Hall Nature School.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recognizes that injuries are widely under-reported. Much attention has been paid to the damage caused by the herbicide dicamba, which has damaged millions of acres of cropland and natural areas across the Midwest and South.

However, the report finds consistent drift from many herbicides, including 2,4-D, glufosinate, and atrazine. In fact, 2,4-D was found more often than dicamba.

“We are asking Governor Pritzker to take decisive action to stop the drift and protect the health and safety of Illinois residents,” Erndt-Pitcher said. “It’s time that we educate the public on how widespread herbicide drift is in Illinois and act to stop it.”

You can sign our petition to Governor Pritzker today. Visit prairierivers.org/stopherbicedrift



Photo courtesy of Martin Kemper

DIRECTOR'S NOTES MAGGIE BRUNS



“WE’RE WORKING TO IMPLEMENT CLIMATE SOLUTIONS WITH COMMUNITY INPUT AT EVERY STEP ALONG THE WAY, WHILE ALSO ENSURING WATER, BIODIVERSITY, AND HABITAT REMAIN CENTERED TO OUR EFFORTS.”

As we mark the second anniversary of the Inflation Reduction Act – the largest climate investment in U.S. history – we find ourselves with critical choices to make. After years of grassroots advocacy, both state and federal governments are taking climate change seriously, investing at unprecedented levels to address and mitigate risks. From expanding clean energy in rural Illinois to improving air quality and advancing environmental justice – the opportunities are so immense that we’re inundated with exciting projects at every turn.

But not all climate funding is equal. Some investments are short sighted or experimental at best. “Climate smart agriculture” and carbon “capture” are designed to sound promising, but closer examination reveals not only threats to drinking water and biodiversity, but arguably very little climate benefit.

Our summer newsletter grapples with these tensions (and many of the issues keeping me up at night!). Will “climate smart” agricultural investments increase the already record-breaking herbicide usage that threatens Illinois’ trees, habitat, and communities? Will carbon capture and sequestration investments extend the lifespan of some of our state’s largest polluters, including the Prairie State Coal Plant and ethanol producers?

Fortunately, PRN is uniquely positioned to tackle these complexities. We’re working to implement climate solutions with community input at every step along the way, while also ensuring water, biodiversity, and habitat remain centered to our efforts.

If we are to mitigate the worst of climate change, we must factor these intertwined issues into our efforts to find solutions, advance equity, and build a more resilient Illinois. The path ahead calls for both optimism and vigilance. Onwards.

Maggie Bruns

PROTECT WATER

PROTECT THE MAHOMET AQUIFER

By Andrew Rehn, Director of Climate Policy

Central Illinois is seeing an onslaught of proposed carbon capture and sequestration projects.

Backed by federal money, these projects would store carbon underground at unprecedented scales — more than 100 times the current volumes stored by a few pilot projects at Archer Daniels Midland in Decatur.

The risks of this experimental technology, which has been heralded by some as a key solution to the climate crisis, are real and significant, putting the future viability of the Mahomet Aquifer at risk.

This summer, Governor JB Pritzker signed the SAFE CCS Act, which provides nation-leading protections against carbon capture and sequestration in the state of Illinois. The bill ensures that polluters will be responsible for cleaning up any messes they make, creates a long-term trust fund for site cleanup, and keeps long-term liability with the sequestering company. It also bans CCS to be used for enhanced oil recovery in Illinois.

However, the SAFE CCS Act did not include a ban on drilling through the Mahomet Aquifer, as we and other partners pushed for.

While the new law provides many critical safeguards for communities, those protections alone are insufficient to protect the Mahomet Aquifer, which is the primary source of drinking

water for nearly one million people. Over 100 communities and tens of thousands of rural homeowners in 14 counties drink water from the Mahomet Aquifer.

Thanks to the leadership and advocacy of community leaders across east central Illinois, including PRN's founder Bruce Hannon, the Mahomet Aquifer was designated a sole source aquifer by the EPA in 2015, which means that there are no feasible alternatives for people in the area.

The SAFE CCS Act allows sequestration of CO₂ with the requirement that the corporation doing the sequestration provides an alternate source of drinking water if the sequestration activity contaminates a drinking water source. The bill assumes that an alternate source exists and requires the companies to provide access to the alternate source.

However, the sole-source designation means that there is no reasonably available alternative drinking water source for users of the Mahomet Aquifer. Therefore, no company would be able to provide an alternate source.

Let's not wait until we have a contaminated aquifer to be surprised by this gap in the law.

Prairie Rivers Network is working with Eco-Justice Collaborative, Illinois People's Action, and other partners across the state to take up this battle and ask for a legislative ban on carbon sequestration under the aquifer and its recharge areas.

Leaks can happen in a number of ways, including along the CO₂ injection well, through other abandoned wells, and earthquakes that might fracture the cap rock confining the injected CO₂. Earthquakes can themselves be caused by carbon sequestration.

Leaked carbon risks acidification of the Mahomet Aquifer, threatening to release heavy metals known to cause acute and chronic toxicity, liver, kidney, and intestinal damage, anemia, and cancer.

The 2016 People's Gas leak of methane into the Mahomet Aquifer demonstrates that cleanup of leaks is long and only after significant enforcement from the Illinois EPA. Despite multiple lawsuits, communities impacted by that leak are still drinking bottled water to this day.

As a part of our Clean Water Forever campaign, we want to ensure that the Mahomet Aquifer stays free of pollution and can provide clean and safe drinking water in perpetuity.



HEAL LAND

COAL ASH HEARINGS

By Andrew Rehn, Director of Climate Policy

After a few quiet years, coal ash is coming back into the statewide spotlight, and this spring marked a turning point in the long battle to clean up coal ash waste in Illinois.

In April, Pekin was home to the first public hearing on a coal ash closure plan since new state rules were finalized in 2021. Seeking input on coal ash at the Powerton coal fired power plant, the Illinois EPA heard from area residents, environmental advocates, and power plant employees about the coal ash. PRN's Andrew Rehn spoke at the hearing, highlighting concerns about the location of the coal ash and the groundwater that may contact the bottom of the impoundments.

Coal ash, the byproduct of burning coal, is generated in huge volumes at coal-fired power plants.

For decades, power plants across Illinois have stored the coal ash in impoundments – large diked ponds that allow the coal ash to settle out of the water used to flush it out of the power plant. When in contact with coal ash, water absorbs dangerous pollutants such as arsenic, lead, chromium, and many other pollutants, and then carries that pollution into groundwater resources or rivers and lakes.

As the coal era too slowly approaches its end, with closure deadlines on every power plant in the state, we are faced with decisions regarding how to manage this waste product. At Prairie Rivers Network, we firmly believe that polluters should pay.

Public hearings are a critical step in any regulatory process, and we worked hard to make sure our coal ash rules have robust opportunities for the public to have a voice. The public input process also allows Prairie Rivers Network and our partners to provide technical review of the thousands of pages of reports submitted at each site. We often help the Illinois EPA identify issues that they had overlooked. By the time this newsletter is

in your hands, another public hearing will have happened in Joliet regarding the coal ash in the Lincoln Stone Quarry.

These hearings are the first of many to come. Illinois passed the Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act in 2019. The bipartisan bill instructed the Illinois EPA and the Illinois Pollution Control Board to start a “rulemaking” process that would create state-level rules for the regulation of coal ash. It required that those rules meet certain minimums of protection, provide a voice for the public, and required coal ash owners to provide a financial guarantee in the form of bonds.



Coal ash pollution seeps into the Middle Fork River.

The rules were debated in 2020 and finalized in spring 2021. With the end of the rulemaking, Illinois's coal ash regulations started regulating. Industry was mostly on time in submitting their permit applications. By spring 2022, permits at nearly a dozen coal ash sites in Illinois were sitting on the desks of Illinois EPA staff. But due to hiring and staffing capacity at the Agency, industry's challenge to the rule, and the growing pains of a new regulatory program, these permits were under review for over two years.

With no public facing action, PRN and the communities

bearing the burdens of coal ash pollution were left hanging.

Now, permits at two coal ash sites have been noticed for public participation, and we are expecting a new permit to be noticed every few months for the foreseeable future.

This marks a major turning point in our work – an opportunity to forever remove the scars of legacy pollution at scale.

Prairie Rivers Network will be regularly drafting comments, traveling across the state to attend hearings, and providing materials to educate the public. These early public comment opportunities are critical to establish a record of how the state's coal ash rules will be interpreted, and PRN will fight to ensure that we protect our waters and heal the lands that the coal plants have blighted.

INSPIRE CHANGE

QUAD CITIES CLIMATE ASSESSMENT

By Nina Struss, River Health and Resiliency Organizer

Living in a river town, you expect flooding, but it still has a big impact on our day-to-day lives.

This summer, flooding in the Quad Cities brought significant disruption to our community. It forced the rescheduling of the beloved “Red, White, and Boom” Fourth of July festival. The high waters caused major traffic impacts, leading to business disruptions and underscoring the increasing threat that extreme weather events can have on our region.

This is been something I’ve been thinking about every day for quite a while.

Earlier this year, Prairie Rivers Network, the National Wildlife Federation, and the University of Illinois Discovery Partners Institute released the Quad Cities Climate Assessment. The report found that unchecked climate change threatens the Quad Cities’ economic viability, natural assets, and public health. The report presents a comprehensive analysis of how climate change might affect our region — and how we can better live with the Mississippi River.

Using localized climate models, the assessment examines potential outcomes under various emissions scenarios, aiming to equip Quad Cities residents with the knowledge to create a healthier, more resilient future.

The impacts of climate change will be felt by everyone in the Quad Cities region.

Vulnerable groups, including those with lower socioeconomic status, Black, Indigenous, People of Color communities, renters, people experiencing homelessness, immigrants, and people

with disabilities, will be more likely to experience significant health impacts from heat or catastrophic property losses from flooding.

But the report also told us what we could do that might help.

The assessment also analyzed the effectiveness of various nature-based solutions. These include overlaying flood risks with site-specific solutions such as vegetative swales, permeable pavements, and green roofs. Across the Quad Cities communities, the performance of these nature-based solutions was evaluated based on the predicted reduction in peak runoff and improvement in infiltration capacity compared to the baseline absence of nature-based solutions.

This analysis demonstrates the potential of nature-based solutions to reduce localized flood risk, showing a decrease in the number of flood events and an overall reduction in flood extent.

Hopefully, we can learn to live alongside the river and use these types of natural solutions, rather than trying to engineer our way out of a warmer, wetter future.

Together, the Quad Cities can work towards a more resilient future, ensuring the safety and well-being of all community members.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE CLIMATE ASSESSMENT

The assessment found that the intensity and frequency of flooding, drought, and extreme heat are projected to increase over the 21st century. Some key findings include:

- Rock Island and other downstream areas face the highest flood risk.
- Davenport and Bettendorf are expected to experience multiple flood events.
- Climate-fueled flooding and extreme heat likely will disproportionately impact vulnerable populations.
- Critical infrastructure, like the I-74 bridge, will become more prone to flooding.



RURAL ELECTRIC CO-OPS: POWERING THE FUTURE OF CLEAN ENERGY IN ILLINOIS



The Corn Belt Cooperative. Photo courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History, Bloomington, IL.

Rural electric cooperatives have been vital in providing electricity to rural Illinoisans since their inception in the late 1930s. Despite their crucial role, rural electric co-ops are lagging in the renewable energy transition.

Created through the New Deal's Rural Electrification Act of 1936, these co-ops emerged because urban utilities found rural electrification unprofitable. Local people, business owners, and farmers banded together, signing up their neighbors and forming cooperatives to bring electricity to their communities.

Today, co-ops distribute electricity to more than 300,000 homes and businesses in Illinois, ensuring steady power supply and additional services like broadband. However, that energy is much dirtier than the energy going to the homes of people served by investor-owned utilities such as ComEd and Ameren. These co-ops are also not bound by state renewable energy goals or rate oversight.

These co-ops own polluting infrastructure, including coal-fired plants, such as the Lake of Egypt and Prairie State Coal Plants. They have plans to run them for decades – despite Prairie State being the dirtiest polluter in the state of Illinois.

Moreover, Illinois' Climate and Equitable Jobs Act's renewable energy programs do not equally support co-op customers, and co-ops often exhibit a lack of transparency within their democratic governance. For instance, board elections see very low voter turnout and restricted voting methods, limiting members' influence over decisions.

Prairie Rivers Network is actively addressing these challenges, ensuring that rural co-ops can lead in the clean energy future. Renewable energy costs have decreased significantly, and federal funding for clean energy transition is at an all-time high, presenting an excellent opportunity for co-ops in rural areas.

OUR INITIATIVES INCLUDE:

- **Research:** Soon, we will launch the Rural Energy Cooperative Scorecard Initiative to track co-ops' progress in transparency and democratic governance.
- **Legislation:** Collaborating with the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition to develop laws enhancing co-op transparency and governance.
- **Organizing and Outreach:** Educating co-op members on their roles and providing tools to advocate for a clean energy future.

Together, we aim to ensure that rural electric co-ops and their members can fully participate in the clean energy transition, benefiting all Illinoisans.

WHY WE GIVE... CATHY & ROGER INMAN



We give to Prairie Rivers Network because we are inspired by the leadership and history behind the organization. We feel privileged to be associated with such accomplished veterans of the effort to preserve and protect the natural world.

We've particularly enjoyed working with like-minded friends to restore and maintain our natural areas. In addition to hands-on work, PRN has co-sponsored trips to our Springfield capitol to meet with legislators and influence legislative change, such as the passage of the 2019 Coal Ash Pollution Prevention Act and the 2021 Climate and Equitable Jobs Act.

“OUR FINANCIAL GIFTS
HELP PRAIRIE RIVERS
TO CONTINUE TO
MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN
OUR LIVES AND IN THE
LIVES OF GENERATIONS
TO COME.”

If you understand the importance of protecting the intricate and essential biological fabric on which we all depend, supporting and working with organizations such as PRN is a important, positive expression of who we are.

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WELCOME TO THE TEAM

JOHNATHAN HETTINGER

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR



In June, Prairie Rivers Network welcomed Johnathan Hettinger as our communications director. Johnathan is originally from Monticello and graduated from the University of Illinois, before working at the News-Gazette and the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting. Johnathan lived in Montana for the past six years, working as an investigative reporter and nonprofit communications director.

Bruce Hannon had a way of saying things that stuck in my head, and ultimately, I think his words helped bring me to Prairie Rivers Network.

I grew up in Monticello, going to Allerton all the time, but I never really realized how much I loved nature until after college when I bought a couple kayaks and frequently went out on the Sangamon River. I would see herons, bald eagles, beavers, kingfishers. It felt like the land around me was alive.

I got to know Bruce through my work as an investigative reporter focusing on industrial agriculture. Bruce and Clark Bullard invited me to come to Silvercreek in Urbana and talk about pesticide pollution. Bruce knew my grandpa, a farmer from Ivesdale, who died years before I was born.

When I told Bruce I decided to move to Montana in 2018, I remember his confident response. He told me, "You'll be back." I asked him why he knew that. He matter of factly said: "The land calls you back."

This past winter, I came home from Montana and got breakfast with Bruce at the Original House of Pancakes in Champaign at 8 a.m. on the day after Christmas (I asked him to get together, but the day and time were his idea). I was working on writing something about home, and I wanted to know how he thought you get people to care about a monoculture landscape, where connection with nature is really difficult to find. I also wanted to learn a bit more about the fight to save Allerton Park.

His insights were that people care. They really, really do. But they're busy living their lives, worrying about their family, their job, how to pay the bills, Illinois sports, and whatever else, so you have to take the time to talk to them and let them know what's going on and how they can help make things better.

It was a really nice breakfast, and as we were leaving, Bruce told me, "You were born of the salt of the earth, and it's up to people like you to save it."

I'm excited to join the team at Prairie Rivers Network and work alongside all of you to make Illinois a better place.

**THE PRAIRIE
RIVERS NETWORK
ANNUAL DINNER IS
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER
20TH AND YOU'RE
INVITED!**

Join Prairie Rivers Network staff and members at the Pear Tree Estate in Champaign for a delicious dinner and a presentation on achievements from the past year, made possible with your support. We look forward to seeing you there!

**PURCHASE YOUR TICKETS TODAY AT
[PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG/DINNER](https://prairierivers.org/dinner)**

RSVP by Monday, September 9th to secure your spot at this fun event!



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CREATE A LEGACY

Prairie Rivers Network has a long history of championing environmental protection. Your dedicated efforts and support have led to tangible improvements in our rivers and landscapes, reflecting PRN's commitment to making a positive impact. However, with increasing environmental challenges and the growing urgency of the climate crisis, our work to protect water, heal land, and inspire lasting change is far from over.

There are several ways you can leave a lasting legacy at Prairie Rivers Network including: gifts to the PRN Endowment, including PRN in your estate plans, making gifts through your IRA or Donor-Advised Fund, and many more.

Please visit the link below, or reach out to Devin Walker at dwalker@prairierivers.org to schedule a time to talk about your legacy! Make a gift today, that makes change for generations to come.

prairierivers.org/legacy

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