

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: MAGGIE BRUNS THE ROAD AHEAD: PIVOTING TO STATE ACTION AND PROTECTIONS

AS we close out what will most certainly be the warmest year on record, with a major shift in climate science and environmental policy coming at the federal level, it's nearly impossible to muster the courage for the work ahead, but our planet needs us to.

I'll be blunt. Everything we've done to advance environmental protections, justice, and climate solutions at the federal level is on the chopping block. The direct implications on Illinois are yet to be seen, but the road ahead will certainly require our local and state leaders to step up and fight back. Are Governor Pritzker and other local leaders ready to do the work? Only time will tell, but we will need to push them to do more to protect our air, water, wildlife, and communities than they've ever contemplated doing before.

In a few short weeks, historic federal climate investments and bedrock environmental protections are going to be at the whim of a new administration, one who has promised to put polluters back in the driver's seat. This new reality is hard to plan for, but we've been here before (to some degree), and we've seen the power of state action in the face of federal setbacks. We've seen how these challenging times can produce nation-leading climate legislation. Now is our moment to push for state, local, and individual action like never before.

The work at the community level – the work that Prairie Rivers Network has done every single day for decades – is more critical than ever.

I am incredibly proud of the team we've built and the work our network has accomplished over the last year. We now have staff across the state who are ready to respond to the needs of communities and push for action. And, until the wheels fall off of the climate investments in the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, our team will accelerate drawing those opportunities down into communities to help in the energy transition we know is necessary. Rest assured, we



“THE WORK AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL – THE WORK THAT PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK HAS DONE EVERY SINGLE DAY FOR DECADES – IS MORE CRITICAL THAN EVER.”

will continue forward on our mission, fighting any effort to undermine our bedrock environmental protections, and standing up to polluters right here in our own backyard.

The good news is that Illinois is already leading the way on climate and energy. It's up to us to make sure our leaders take off their blinders and leave no stone unturned. Equally important to Illinois is the need to reimagine agriculture's role in our state to ensure that we are not only leading on a just transition to clean energy, but also addressing its impact on biodiversity, water, and climate crises threatening our future.

This edition of the PRN newsletter provides ways we can continue to push forward in the face of challenging times that are just around the bend.

THERE'S A LOT WE CAN DO AND EVEN MORE TO PROTECT. NOW, LET'S GET TO WORK.

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PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK BOARD OF DIRECTORS THANKS BILL VAN HAGEY FOR DECADE OF SERVICE

We extend our deepest gratitude to Bill Van Hagey, whose decade-long commitment as a board member profoundly shaped Prairie Rivers Network's path forward. A dedicated environmental advocate and experienced attorney, Bill brought invaluable expertise and perspective to our organization since joining the board in 2014 until retiring earlier this year.

Bill's impact is felt across many of our initiatives. From urging us to form deeper partnerships with leading environmental law firms to guiding our Middle Fork and Pond Creek litigation efforts, his leadership has been instrumental in protecting Illinois' rivers from coal pollution. He encouraged our staff to be bold and relentless in working to hold polluters accountable.

Bill also led to the establishment of our Endowment and helped establish options for legacy giving, setting a foundation to help sustain and grow our work well into the future.

Bill's commitment to environmental stewardship began in his early days as a Boy Scout and grew through his studies in environmental law. His enduring dedication inspires us, and we are so grateful for his support, wisdom, and guidance in our shared mission to protect Illinois' rivers, lands, and communities.



THANK YOU, BILL, FOR ALL YOU'VE DONE TO STRENGTHEN PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK AND CREATE A LASTING IMPACT ON THE HEALTH OF OUR ENVIRONMENT.

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PROTECT WATER OUR HOME. OUR WATER. OUR AQUIFER.

This November, we had hoped to secure new protections in Springfield for the Mahomet Aquifer, a sole-source water supply for nearly one million people in Central Illinois. The bill, SB3968, introduced by Senator Paul Faraci, aimed to ban carbon sequestration under and through the Mahomet Aquifer and its recharge areas identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2015.

Given the recent track record of carbon sequestration, this seemed like a straightforward and essential step.

Earlier this year, Archer Daniels Midland had two leaks at its carbon capture facility near Decatur, resulting in a Safe Drinking Water Act violation notice from the EPA and a pause on injection. The incident showcases the risks posed by carbon sequestration to the aquifer, which is the sole water source for many in the region. The three projects currently proposed are in total 50 times larger than ADM's pilot project.

Despite these clear concerns, Senate leadership paused progress on SB3968, claiming the need for more time to understand the issue's complexities. However, from our perspective, there's nothing complex about the need for protection. Any risk to the Mahomet Aquifer is simply unacceptable.

Industry representatives opposed the bill, downplaying the risks of contamination from carbon pollution. Unfortunately, researchers from the University of Illinois who testified at the hearing said there is a "remote chance" of harm to the aquifer, downplaying the threats to the aquifer and the people, communities, businesses, and farms that rely on it.

But communities in Central Illinois are well aware of these risks, especially after incidents like ADM's recent leak and the 2016 methane leak by People's Gas, which contaminated private wells near Fisher, leaving community members without safe drinking water to this day. Advocates are clear that ADM's recent

leak, though just outside the Mahomet Aquifer's immediate boundaries, is a cautionary tale. Current state regulations require companies to provide alternative drinking water in case of contamination, but no backup exists if an irreplaceable, sole-source aquifer like the Mahomet is compromised. We insist that only a legislative ban on carbon sequestration will secure the aquifer's future.

Recognizing this gap in protections, local communities across rural Illinois, from DeWitt to Ford to Champaign counties, are stepping up to protect their water through local ordinances and grassroots activism. County leaders have shown courage and foresight by working on temporary ordinances against carbon sequestration projects, fueling momentum toward a state ban.

Senator Faraci and Representative Carol Ammons have led a bipartisan effort in support of SB3968 and its house companion bill HB5874. We're grateful to all of the legislators who stepped up to support

the bill, including Senator Chapin Rose, Senator Sally Turner, Representative Brandun Schweizer and more.

As Representative Ammons aptly noted, "This fight is about more than water — it's about protecting the health, safety, and future of every person who depends on the Mahomet Aquifer."

As the campaign to protect the Mahomet Aquifer continues, Central Illinois residents are standing firm. Their voices, amplified by local ordinances and community mobilization, send a powerful message to the state. This movement, sparked by ADM's alarming failures, shows that the aquifer's protection is not just a regional concern but a matter of statewide importance.

TAKE ACTION TODAY AND TELL YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS TO PROTECT THE MAHOMET AQUIFER.



The One Earth ethanol plant in Gibson City is proposing to build a carbon sequestration facility underneath the recharge area of the Mahomet Aquifer.

HEAL LAND

THE HIDDEN COST OF LAWN TREATMENT

In a world where pollution often feels beyond our control, we have been thinking about ways that we can make a difference right here, in our backyards, schools and communities. One impactful step we can all take is how we care for our own green spaces, starting with a shift away from chemical treatments.

While we're addressing the widespread issue of herbicides drifting from agricultural fields and impacting nearby plants and trees, there's something everyone can do closer to home to protect our natural spaces: reconsider traditional lawn treatments. The manicured, grass-only lawn has its roots in outdated European ideals, but today's reality reveals its hidden costs: millions of pounds of chemicals are used annually to maintain this look. These treatments come at a steep price — harming pollinators, endangering local wildlife, and even impacting human health.

BIODIVERSITY AT RISK

The 'perfect' lawn may look green, but it disrupts local ecosystems, threatening essential pollinators like bees and butterflies, as well as beneficial insects. Lawn chemicals often target pests indiscriminately, eliminating species that play a vital role in our food systems and plant health.

In our recent report *Hidden in Plain Sight*, we highlighted the impact of herbicide drift on trees and native plants. Chemicals such as 2,4-D and dicamba can travel beyond treated areas, damaging nearby trees, gardens, and wild plants. Over time, repeated exposure weakens plants, making them more vulnerable to disease or even death, which further disrupts biodiversity and wildlife habitats.

CLOSER TO HOME: THE RISKS TO HUMAN HEALTH

The effects aren't confined to the outdoors. Studies show that lawn pesticides can drift into homes or cling to shoes and pets, exposing families to toxic chemicals linked to cancer, birth defects, and hormone disruption. Children are especially vulnerable, given their close contact with treated lawns, as are pets, who can experience heightened cancer risks from exposure.

A lush, chemically treated lawn isn't worth compromising biodiversity, community health, or water quality. Together, we can reshape how we care for green spaces in Illinois by shifting toward healthier alternatives.



HERE'S HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- **Eliminate insecticides:** Consider natural pest control by mowing higher, watering less, and nurturing healthy soil.
- **Encourage chemical-free community spaces:** Talk to your local park or school district about safer alternatives.
- **Plant low-maintenance, pollinator-friendly grass:** There are beautiful lawn mixes available that require less upkeep and support wildlife.
- **Ditch synthetic fertilizers:** Instead, try planting clover or other nitrogen-fixing plants to naturally enrich your soil.
- **Reduce mosquito sprays:** Eliminate standing water around your home, and try adding a bat box to attract natural pest controllers.
- **Create a native habitat:** Add native plants to your yard to promote biodiversity.

BY ADOPTING THESE PRACTICES, WE CAN EACH PLAY A ROLE IN CREATING HEALTHIER, MORE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES. JOIN US IN TRANSFORMING OUR LAWNS AND SHARED SPACES INTO SANCTUARIES FOR POLLINATORS, PETS, AND PEOPLE.

WHY WE GIVE

TONY & JOYCE SINGH



**“WE WANT A RETURN
ON OUR INVESTMENT
AND WE BELIEVE
THAT PRAIRIE RIVERS
NETWORK WILL MAKE
THAT RETURN.”**

THE JOYCE & TONY
SINGH FAMILY
FOUNDATION



AS we think back on this year, we're reminded of our first introduction to Prairie Rivers Network and why we felt moved to become members. Our connection to Prairie Rivers Network began with our daughter, who introduced us to Nina Struss and her work in the Quad Cities community. We'd heard of the group and their work on the Climate Assessment, but meeting the team showed us what Prairie Rivers Network is all about – smart, dedicated people who roll up their sleeves and do their work for our rivers, our land, and our communities.

When someone calls with a problem, Prairie Rivers Network is there to pick up the phone. Whether it is a homeowner looking for resources on native plants and pollinators, a community looking to protect their drinking water, or like us, a landowner whose land is suffering from herbicide drift, Prairie Rivers Network shows up. They stand beside individuals, offer guidance, and take real action.

Our family has planted and cared for more than 4,000 trees on our land over the last 30 years, but each spring and throughout the growing season, we watch as herbicides hurt what we've nurtured for so long. Year after year, we've watched old growth trees slowly die back or fail to come back to life in the spring, and saplings wither

away just as fast as they can break the ground. Each year, fighting a losing battle.

When we shared our story with Prairie Rivers Network, we felt heard. They shared their knowledge and expertise, they introduced us to individuals experiencing the same issues, and they kept doing the work. During this time, Prairie Rivers Network has gone on to release their report, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, which details 6 years of monitoring across the state and ensuring the issue is being covered by media like their recent exclusive with the Chicago Tribune.

For us, when we think about investing in an organization it's about three things – their mission aligns with our values, their work is based in science and embraces ecology, and they are smart with their funds. Prairie Rivers is just that.

As the year comes to a close, please join us in giving generously to Prairie Rivers Network. Supporting Prairie Rivers Network means investing in work that gives back tenfold—for healthier water, healthier ecosystems, and a better future for all of us.

**WARMLY,
TONY & JOYCE SINGH**

INSPIRE CHANGE CORN AT A CROSSROADS

For generations, corn has defined Illinois' landscape. But as we face mounting environmental challenges, our state has an unprecedented opportunity to emerge as a leader in pioneering a more sustainable agricultural future that protects biodiversity and water.

Stretching across the horizon, miles of cornfields dominate Illinois, but this monoculture comes with steep costs. Once home to 22 million acres of thriving tallgrass prairie, Illinois' rich ecosystems have largely been replaced by corn and soybean fields, leaving behind polluted rivers, eroded soils, and rural communities grappling with health risks and environmental crises.

The environmental impacts demand our attention: herbicides drift onto schools and homes, while fertilizer runoff has made many waters unsafe for fishing or drinking. Pesticides decimate insect populations, and our native birds are disappearing, while counties with corn production see rising cancer rates. Illinois' focus on corn, particularly for ethanol, is driving an ecological toll, and rural communities are paying the price.

THE ETHANOL ILLUSION

The corn boom has been fueled in part by policies like the 2007 Renewable Fuel Standard, which mandates ethanol in gasoline. Promoted as a green fuel, ethanol is now understood to emit more greenhouse gases than gasoline over its lifecycle. Despite these findings, ethanol remains heavily subsidized, supported by government policies that sustain the corn economy at the expense of our water and soil health.

The costs aren't only environmental. For farmers, the ethanol boom has primarily benefited agribusinesses rather than small-scale growers, who face rising expenses and shrinking profit margins. Meanwhile, communities in corn-producing regions bear higher cancer rates and health impacts from constant exposure to agricultural chemicals.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

With the rise of electric cars, ethanol demand is likely to decrease, and Illinois now stands at a critical juncture. The recent \$430 million Climate Pollution Reduction Grant, with \$111 million allocated to "climate-smart agriculture," offers a unique opportunity to move beyond corn and ethanol dependence. By investing in a diversified agriculture system, Illinois can revitalize soil health, restore ecosystems, and better protect our water, while growing healthy food for people and our planet.

The path forward lies in transforming our landscape through diversified crops, agroforestry, and sustainable practices that strengthen our soils and support biodiversity. Prairie Rivers Network is dedicated to advocating for these sustainable solutions that help Illinois meet the urgent demands of the climate and biodiversity crises.

Together, we can reshape Illinois agriculture into a model that doesn't deplete our resources but instead revitalizes them.

WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF TIME. WE MUST ACT NOW AND SEIZE THIS MOMENT TO PROTECT OUR ECOSYSTEMS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES.



ILLINOIS RURAL COMMUNITIES: A CLIMATE-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION

In rural Illinois, a clean energy transition is unfolding, transforming landscapes and empowering communities.

As federal and state initiatives pour funding into renewable energy projects, these once coal-dependent areas are seizing the opportunity to embrace sustainable practices. With help from Prairie Rivers Network, rural communities are redefining their economic futures. This shift not only addresses climate change but also fosters local resilience, job creation, and environmental stewardship.



MARION: TURNING MINES INTO COMMUNITY CENTERS

The win: In Marion, a once-abandoned coal mine site is being revitalized into the Oasis Sports Park, a \$30 million sports complex. The facility will feature a dome for various sports, serving as a hub for economic growth and attracting visitors from across the region.

How we helped: Prairie Rivers Network has long championed the need for funding to address coal pollution, from lobbying in Washington, D.C., to member-supported action alerts. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law turned that effort into reality, securing a major victory for coal communities and clean water. Reclaiming abandoned mine lands is essential for addressing past harms and supporting an equitable clean energy transition.

JOPPA: HELPING THE NEXT GENERATION ADAPT

The win: The Joppa Coal Plant closure on September 1, 2022, marked a turning point for the 400-resident community. Hope emerged through the Displaced Energy Worker Dependent Scholarship, helping dependents of displaced energy workers. Noah Holland, whose father lost his job at the plant, is now pursuing a degree in Electrical Engineering, supported by this scholarship.

How we helped: The initiative is just one example of the policies and programs that PRN helped develop and pass as part of the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act to support the people affected by fossil fuel plant closures. And now we are helping get the word out about CEJA's programs that support energy communities – by developing relationships with coal communities, we're connecting with families like the Hollands to explore new opportunities.



CLEAN ENERGY IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

The win: Two Southern Illinois projects were awarded the U.S. Department of Energy's "Energizing Rural Communities Prize." Each received \$300,000 for clean energy initiatives. The "Coal to Solar in Carrier Mills" project will transition from coal to solar, conduct energy audits, and pilot solar at the wastewater plant. Meanwhile, the Dowell-Carbondale partnership aims to create a revenue-positive, community-owned energy system promoting local ownership and self-sufficiency.

How we helped: Prairie Rivers Network worked closely with community leaders in Carrier Mills to conduct energy audits on several publicly-owned buildings, advance solar opportunities, and engage with community members. We helped both initiatives create engaging videos that were part of the Prize submissions. You can view these inspiring videos on our YouTube channel.

2024 ANNUAL DINNER AWARDEES

This year, Prairie Rivers Network proudly recognized two leaders whose work is shaping a more just and equitable future for both people and our planet. Their dedication to inclusion, access, and sustainability is strengthening Illinois.

In 2024, we presented the River Steward Award to Tomas Delgado and the Outstanding Public Servant Award to Hilary Scott-Ogunrinde. Though their focuses differ, both work tirelessly to ensure historically marginalized communities are central to the movement for a sustainable future.

2024 RIVER STEWARD: TOMAS DELGADO

Tomas Delgado, founder and director of Nurtured in Nature, has built an inspiring model for inclusivity in the outdoors. Nurtured in Nature, an outdoor wellness program supported by Healthy Champaign County, fosters connections between people of color and Champaign County's natural spaces. Through accessible hikes focused on building relationships, Tomas has created a space for community and belonging.

His academic background in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois guides his vision, addressing the disconnection marginalized communities often experience with nature. Inspired by his work with the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, Tomas launched Nurtured in Nature to create welcoming, safe spaces in the outdoors. These seasonal hikes, open exclusively to people of color, provide a secure environment for participants to reflect, bond, and reclaim the outdoors.

Tomas also serves on the board of Bluestem Nature School, which actively participates in our herbicide drift advocacy. His leadership is redefining access to natural spaces and promoting healing for all.



OUTSTANDING PUBLIC SERVANT: HILARY SCOTT-OGUNRINDE

Hilary Scott-Ogunrinde, Deputy Director of Energy & Business Utility at the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, is advancing Illinois' clean energy future with a commitment to equity. Her work ensures the clean energy transition uplifts coal and environmental justice communities that powered Illinois for generations.

Hilary's leadership in implementing the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) has been transformative, bringing workforce, community, and business programs to life. These programs ensure that Illinois' clean energy shift benefits those historically excluded from economic progress.

Before joining DCEO, Hilary's career in the nonprofit and small business sectors established her as a strong advocate for environmental justice. Her hands-on work with policymakers during CEJA's development has driven its implementation with a focus on equity and justice.

Through her role, Hilary and her team continue to design programs that help frontline communities access clean energy resources, building a sustainable future that serves both the environment and communities long excluded from its benefits.





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