

MARCH OF THE DATA CENTERS

Over the past six months, communities across Illinois have been caught off guard by sudden proposals—often from major tech companies—to build enormous data centers nearby. These projects promise jobs and innovation, but come with huge demands for land, electricity, and water. Data centers aren’t new, but the speed and scale of this new construction wave are. What changed?

HOW WE GOT HERE

Data centers house computer infrastructure, and have existed in some form for decades. Their size—and numbers—have expanded over time, almost without our noticing, to accommodate new technologies. They power much of our daily life: internet searches, cloud storage, streaming, and social media. But, until recently, most people rarely heard about them.

That changed in 2022 with the release of OpenAI’s ChatGPT, a free generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool. The launch triggered an AI “gold rush” that promised revolutionary technological advances, but said little about the resources needed to make them run.

Three years later, generative AI is embedded in nearly every facet of our digital lives. And as it turns out, the “revolution” no one really asked for requires vast amounts of land, water, and electricity in a time of stretched resources.

DRAINING IMPORTANT RESOURCES

Data centers are enormous consumers of electricity and water. Each one can cover hundreds of acres, drawing large amounts of electricity to power and cool thousands of servers running nonstop. Keeping those machines from overheating during 24/7 operations requires constant cooling. There are several ways to cool data center equipment, but there are tradeoffs between energy and water usage: If less energy is used for cooling, more water will be required. No matter what, the environmental footprint is big.

Data centers are also getting bigger. A 100 megawatt data center used to be at the high end of resource use; there are now proposals for 1000MW data centers. A data center currently proposed in Sangamon County would use 600MW of electricity; for context, that amount of electricity would power hundreds of thousands of homes. Bigger data centers mean increased water use as well.

COMMUNITIES PAY THE PRICE

For local residents, there’s a risk that these projects bring more costs than benefits. On the electric side, data centers pass

many of their costs on to ratepayers. The Union of Concerned Scientists found that the public is paying \$4.3 billion to support data centers across seven states—mostly through higher energy prices and grid upgrades needed to keep up with their massive, around-the-clock demand.

Water is no better. Illinois has no enforceable statewide system to track large water users, meaning communities might not find out about major withdrawals from public water supplies until after the fact. Without oversight, a single private company’s cooling needs can reshape public water systems, leaving local residents and ecosystems to deal with the consequences.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

Illinois must get ahead of this wave. Comprehensive policy reform is needed to ensure development is sustainable and fair. PRN supports policies that would:

- **Require transparency:** All large industrial and commercial water users should track and report their water use.
- **Hold companies accountable:** Data centers should pay for new, clean energy to offset their electricity demand and grid upgrades.
- **Strengthen permitting:** Local and state permitting should include clear, science-based sustainability criteria such as water-use limits, air pollution controls and energy efficiency.
- **Enforce the rules:** Establish real penalties for facilities that fail to meet these standards.

PRN IS COMMITTED TO MEETING THIS CHALLENGE. IN 2026, WE’LL BE EXPANDING OUR RESEARCH, ADVOCACY, AND PUBLIC OUTREACH TO ENSURE THE NEXT GENERATION OF INDUSTRY IN ILLINOIS USES RESOURCES RESPONSIBLY.

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HEAL LAND

A RECKONING FOR
MIDWESTERN AGRICULTURE

BY ROBERT HIRSCHFELD

In recent months, soybeans have received the kind of media spotlight that would make Taylor Swift jealous.

The Midwest farm economy has become ground zero in a trade war with China—and in our own internal political struggle. The US produces roughly 4 billion bushels of soybeans on 85 million acres; China bought half of US soybean exports in 2024. In response to Trump's tariffs, it has turned to other suppliers.

The media fixates on the chaos of the Trump era, reaching for a familiar narrative: the struggling farmer just trying to get his crop to market. But less attention is paid to the underlying fragility of American agriculture.

Here's the truth: American farmers overproduce generic, undifferentiated commodities for a competitive global market, and other countries are eager to join in a race to the ecological bottom to produce the same crops. Brazil and Argentina are busy clearing rainforest and grasslands to expand soybean acreage, much as we once plowed under the tallgrass prairie.

Trump's tariffs have clearly disrupted American agriculture, and farmers are feeling the pain.

I understand the temptation to use this moment to score political points—to cast farmers as victims of one administration's misguided policies. But the crisis predates tariffs. Decades of bipartisan agricultural policy encouraged massive overproduction for volatile global markets, while the real costs—polluted water, depleted soils, pesticide drift, dust storms, and the erosion of rural life—were pushed onto the public. The myth of the farmer as noble steward has been exploited by corporate agribusiness to resist even modest reforms.

Both parties helped entrench a colonial-style rural economy, one that extracts wealth from land and labor while leaving behind shuttered hospitals, closing schools, and disappearing main streets.

A reckoning was already coming for row-crop agriculture. The trade war just sped it up.

Illinois has some of the best soils in the world, built over thousands of years by prairie roots. Yet we use them to grow corn ethanol and surplus commodities the market is signaling it doesn't need.

We've built an elaborate system—crop insurance subsidies, ethanol mandates, and emergency bailouts—to shield farmers from those signals. We produce so much corn that the federal government requires us to burn it in gas tanks. It's absurd, and everyone not directly profiting knows it.

We're now told Sustainable Aviation Fuel will save us—but what's being proposed is ethanol 2.0. Corn and soy-based jet fuel is land-intensive, carbon-heavy, and requires massive subsidies. Replacing even a small share of jet fuel would mean more acres, more fertilizer, more erosion, more polluted water. Our food system is too important to shackle it to yet another biofuel boondoggle.

Illinois recently received \$111 million from the U.S. EPA for "climate-smart agriculture." Most of it will fund short-term practices like no-till on about three percent of our corn and soybean acres. That's not transformation—it's triage. Those dollars should be used to build new systems and markets that feed people, restore ecosystems, and keep value in rural communities.

When I argue that we should diversify—grow more perennials, move livestock back to pasture, expand regional food supply chains—I often hear: "Those markets don't exist." And they won't, as long as we keep propping up commodities. With corn and soybean markets faltering, we are out of excuses.

We've reached the crisis point. Now comes the work of building something resilient: fewer acres of corn and soy; more oats, legumes, vegetables, nut trees, pasture, wetlands, and healthy food; stronger rural economies; cleaner water; healthier land.

ALL OF IT IS POSSIBLE. BUT ONLY IF WE STOP CLINGING TO—AND THROWING MONEY AT—A SYSTEM THAT'S ALREADY BROKEN.



PROTECT WATER

RIVER STORIES: VOICES FROM THE KASKASKIA RIVER

AN INTERVIEW WITH MUSICIAN COLE BRIDGES

Prairie Rivers Network is committed to restoring river access across the state. As part of our ongoing efforts, we're excited to launch River Stories, a new series exploring Illinois' waterways through the eyes of the people who live, work, and play along them. Each story highlights the personal, cultural, and environmental significance of our rivers, illuminating the deep connections that bind communities to these vital ecosystems.

For our first feature, we spoke to musician Cole Bridges about his experiences with the Kaskaskia River, Illinois' second largest river system, whose watershed covers roughly 10% of the state. Flowing from near Champaign in the east to the Mississippi River in the south, the Kaskaskia has long been a hub for transportation, agriculture, and settlement. Its waters have sustained Native peoples, early settlers, and generations of Illinoisans, shaping towns like Okawville along its banks. From its rich history to the challenges it faces today, the Kaskaskia exemplifies the vital role rivers play in connecting people, land, and culture—and River Stories is here to capture those connections, one river at a time.

Raised in Okawville, Illinois, Cole Bridges has spent years exploring the place he calls home through music, research, and storytelling. Now living in St. Louis, Missouri, Bridges' latest project, *Okaw*, honors the river for which his hometown is named—the Kaskaskia River, known locally as the Okaw. “Most of my artistic work over the past 15 years has been in the form of folk & country music, which have long traditions of celebrating local landmarks through song,” Bridges says. “The piece of music I wrote for the Okaw is my way of taking part in this tradition.”

Though Bridges' personal experiences on the water were limited, his connection remains meaningful: family history ties him to the river's legacy. One great-grandfather was a hunter and trapper who lived along its banks, while another ran a general store at the edge of the river bottoms in Covington.

Bridges recalls a recent memory of fishing with a cousin near their family homestead, catching 20- to 30-pound blue catfish and feeling a rare closeness to the river. “It felt like a lifetime achievement, just being out on the water and taking in the environment from that vantage point.”

Over the years, Bridges has observed changes in both the river and how people relate to it. “It seems some of the greatest changes have been in our collective relationship to the river,” he reflects. Once a hub for recreation, travel, and sustenance, the Kaskaskia now feels distant to many locals. Heavy agricultural production and runoff have also raised concerns for water quality and environmental health.

“I HOPE FOR A TIME WHEN PEOPLE CAN SWIM IN AND EAT FROM THE WATERS OF THE KASKASKIA WITHOUT FEAR OF LEACHING CHEMICALS OR OTHER POLLUTANTS. I HOPE FOR THE PROTECTION OF ALL LIFEFORMS WHO DWELL IN AND AROUND THE RIVER.”

Still, Bridges remains hopeful for the river's future. “I hope for a time when people can swim in and eat from the waters of the Kaskaskia without fear of leaching chemicals or other pollutants. I hope for the protection of all lifeforms who dwell in and around the river,” he says.

If the Kaskaskia could speak, Bridges imagines it would urge us to pay attention. “Probably something along the lines of, ‘LISTEN to me!’ That, or ‘Follow me.’ I think there's a great deal to learn from our waterways, and all of the non-human natural world.” Through *Okaw*, Bridges invites listeners to reconnect with the river, with their communities, and with the natural world that shapes them—a reminder that even a quiet river can tell a powerful story.

You can listen to and buy Bridges' album *Okaw* on Bandcamp. 10% of all sales are being donated to Prairie Rivers Network. Scan the QR code below or visit colebridges.bandcamp.com/album/okaw.



INSPIRE CHANGE

PROGRESS THROUGH PERSEVERANCE: ADVANCING OUR RESILIENT FUTURE

This has been a year of challenges and determination. Amid federal chaos, funding cuts, and threats to our bedrock environmental protections, Prairie Rivers Network has continued to stand strong—defending clean water, advancing climate resilience, and empowering communities. Across the state, our work has delivered real progress and each victory reflects our unwavering belief that Illinois’ environmental future is built from the ground up—through community leadership, collaboration, and action. In a year defined by disruption, Prairie Rivers Network has proven once again that progress is still possible when people come together to protect the places and resources we all depend on.

CLEAN WATER VICTORY: MAHOMET AQUIFER PROTECTED BY LAW

This year, Illinois took a historic step to protect one of its most vital natural resources—the Mahomet Aquifer, which supplies clean drinking water to more than 850,000 residents, 100 communities, and countless farms and businesses across Central Illinois. Recognized by the U.S. EPA as a sole-source aquifer, the Mahomet is irreplaceable—if contaminated, there is no alternative water supply for the region.

Amid growing concerns about pollution from expanding carbon sequestration projects, Illinois lawmakers acted decisively, passing legislation to safeguard the Mahomet Aquifer from potential contamination. The bill, signed into law this August, earned bipartisan support, signaling a shared commitment to protecting the state’s drinking water and public health.

This victory reflects years of community advocacy and legislative leadership, underscoring that clean water is foundational to climate resilience. As Illinois faces increasing environmental and industrial pressures, the new law ensures the Mahomet Aquifer remains protected for generations to come—a powerful win for people, ecosystems, and clean water!

BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR WETLAND CONSERVATION IN THE QUAD CITIES

In a major conservation milestone, the City of Rock Island voted YES to take the first official step toward permanently protecting over 600 acres of historic wetlands in southwest Rock Island—

one of the largest local conservation commitments in recent history. This decision begins the process of designating the area as a Land and Water Reserve through the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, securing lasting protection for clean water, flood mitigation, and critical wildlife habitat.

This achievement didn’t happen overnight. Years of dedication and action from community advocates, conservationists, and local leaders have led to the protection of these wetlands’ rare and thriving ecosystem. Running alongside a portion of the Mississippi River, the area provides natural flood control, filters pollutants, supports critical habitat for winter night roosting bald eagles, and supports over 207 species, including endangered wildlife like the Blanding’s turtle.

At a time when communities across the country face environmental rollbacks and worsening floods, Rock Island’s commitment stands out as a powerful example of local climate resilience in action. This historic vote not only honors decades of grassroots work but ensures that these wetlands—and all the wildlife and people who depend on them—will continue to thrive for generations to come.

HELPING SOUTHERN ILLINOIS COMMUNITIES SHINE

Two Southern Illinois communities are proving that small towns can make big strides in America’s clean energy future. Thanks to support from Prairie Rivers Network, paired with state and federal incentives—and prize-winning innovation in a 2024 U.S. Department of Energy competition—the Villages of Dowell and Carrier Mills have officially gone solar, marking powerful first steps toward energy independence and long-term cost savings.

In Dowell, new solar installations at the Village Hall and Fire Department will save more than \$3,500 annually—funds that can now be reinvested directly into the community. Meanwhile, Carrier Mills completed a 150 kW solar project at its wastewater treatment plant, slashing annual electricity costs by \$25K–\$30K and projecting over \$1 million in lifetime savings. Energy audits of other community buildings in Carrier Mills have created a map for future efficiency upgrades.



These projects highlight the vital role of rural communities in driving the clean energy transition. By embracing solar power, towns like Dowell and Carrier Mills are reducing emissions, stabilizing local energy costs, and keeping savings in the hands of their communities—all while strengthening resilience in the face of rising energy prices and climate challenges.

This is more than local progress—it's a blueprint for rural-led climate leadership across Illinois and beyond.

BUILDING A RURAL CLEAN ENERGY FUTURE

In September 2024, we launched the Illinois Rural Electric Cooperative Scorecard—a first-of-its-kind tool that shines a light on how co-ops across the state are transitioning to clean energy, engaging their member-owners, and operating transparently. Rural electric cooperatives power hundreds of thousands of Illinoisans, and this Scorecard gives member-owners the information and voice they deserve in shaping their communities' energy futures.

In its first year, the Scorecard has already driven measurable progress: 39 performance metrics improved statewide, with notable gains in transparency, governance, and renewable energy policy. More cooperatives are now publishing their fuel mix, explaining how to vote or run for their boards, and communicating about federal funding opportunities under the previous version of the Inflation Reduction Act.

While some areas still need work, this growing transparency movement shows that rural Illinois is stepping into a new era of energy democracy. By continuing to track, publish, and hold co-ops accountable, we're ensuring that rural communities don't just benefit from the clean energy transition—they lead it, guided by the power of informed, engaged member-owners.

Are you a member-owner? See your co-op's score at www.greenneighborchallenge.org/CoopScoreCards.

STRONGER GRID, MORE AFFORDABLE BILLS: A WIN FOR ILLINOIS FAMILIES

Illinois has taken a major step toward protecting families, businesses, and the climate with the passage of the Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability (CRGA) Act (SB25 HA4)—a landmark bill designed to keep energy affordable while strengthening the state's power grid.

Amid rising electricity prices and surging demand driven by data center growth, the CRGA Act provides a responsible,

forward-looking solution to Illinois' energy affordability crisis. The legislation expands grid capacity to prevent price spikes, boosts energy and gas efficiency programs to save consumers money, and enhances statewide energy planning to ensure long-term reliability. It also reinforces Illinois' commitment to equity in the clean energy transition, applying strong equity standards to new battery storage and geothermal programs, just as with wind and solar.

"The CRGA Act is a big win for the climate and a win for ratepayers," said Andrew Rehn, PRN's Climate Policy Director. "The electric rate affordability crisis is top of mind for everyone. Due to growing demand, driven largely by data centers, electric rates are going to keep going up, but with the CRGA Act we can protect ratepayers and continue Illinois' clean energy transition."

QUIET WORK, BOLD IMPACT: ADVANCING THE SCIENCE TO SAVE OUR TREES

You may not have seen much from us on the herbicide drift front this year—but that's with good reason. From expanding monitoring to growing our habitat and biodiversity team, Prairie Rivers Network spent this year quietly committed to our work to protect biodiversity, water, and human health from the harmful impacts of herbicide and pesticide drift, despite cuts in staff and funding at state and federal levels.

In fact, 2025 was extraordinarily active for us behind the scenes. We worked to protect our children's schools, playgrounds, and athletic fields, giving in-person tours of these facilities to better show legislators and media evidence of pesticide injury. We scaled up our monitoring efforts, expanding the number of sites visited and increasing our testing. Between our efforts and those of our partners, we can now say that 100% of counties in Illinois are being monitored for herbicide drift—a milestone that ensures no community is left unprotected.

This monitoring, organizing, and educating on the ground has led to the drafting of bold new legislation to safeguard the places we hold most dear—from backyards to nature preserves—from harmful drift, while continuing to build a statewide network of advocates ready to take action.

This strong foundation is crucial for what lies ahead. Prairie Rivers Network will pick up the pace in 2026—building capacity, organizing, and delivering powerful messages about pesticide drift and its effects on biodiversity, habitat, and human health.





WHY WE GIVE

LAUREN & JEFFREY BROKISH



“WE GIVE BECAUSE WE BELIEVE IN THIS PLACE AND IN THE PEOPLE WHO ARE MAKING IT BETTER.”



WE live here, and we are never moving. Champaign is our home, and we want our corner of the world to be the best possible place to live, work, and eat. Every day, we work hard alongside our amazing team to make that vision real. Between our restaurants, cafes, market booths, and food hubs, the Salt Fork Food Works teams feed more than 20,000 people every week.

That work always comes back to the land and the water. The Saline Branch runs right behind our farm, giving our company its name and reminding us that everything we do here travels downstream. Clean water and healthy soils are not abstract ideas to us. They are what make it possible to grow good food, raise healthy animals, and build a strong community. We are avid hikers, and the first lesson you learn in backpacking is that the only thing you truly need to survive is clean water. Caring for our environment is part of caring for each other.

That is why we support Prairie Rivers Network. They protect the water beneath our feet and the rivers that connect us all. Their advocacy helped protect the Mahomet Aquifer, the drinking water source for nearly a million people across Illinois. They bring people together, like farmers, neighbors, and policymakers to take real action for clean water and healthy ecosystems.

Supporting Prairie Rivers Network helps ensure that the next generation inherits a community that values care, connection, and responsibility.

Please join us in investing in that future.

Warmly,
Lauren & Jeffrey Brokish

P.S. We are looking forward to new collaborations with the Prairie Rivers Network team on our farm next year. Stay tuned.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

MAGGIE BRUNS



As we wrap up an extremely challenging year, I'm quite frankly surprised by (and so grateful for) how many wins our network has to celebrate. From robust support of coal communities as they embrace their new clean energy future, to protecting Illinois' only sole-source aquifer from the threats of carbon pollution, to encouraging leaders

in Rock Island to protect nearly 600 acres of critical wetlands, to ending the fall veto session in Springfield with yet another nation-leading climate bill—we made a significant impact. Even more good things are underway in Illinois, and Prairie Rivers Network is not sitting on the sidelines – we are actively pressing for change. Our vision for Illinois' future is still within reach and with your support, we are making progress wherever we can.

Make no mistake about it. History books will mark 2025 by its federal chaos and the destruction of bedrock environmental protections, among other things. But we're writing our own chapter here in Illinois—one that underscores that when people work together, we can accomplish big things in the face of extreme opposition. As I reflect on 2025, one thing is clear: Illinois can do much more than just hold the line. We can push the country forward.

Prairie Rivers Network is stronger than ever before and we are not slowing down. Instead, as you've read throughout this newsletter, we are being more strategic with our time and limited resources, knowing that we can't fight every fire they set.

Our work together has never been more important. Just like PRN's founder, Bruce Hannon, we are planting seeds of change every day that will eventually sprout and grow our influence into the future. Thank you for your continued trust and commitment to work alongside our team to make real and lasting change here in Illinois.

In community,

2025 ANNUAL DINNER AWARDEES

Prairie Rivers Network proudly introduced the inaugural *Hannon Seeds of Change* award at our Annual Dinner on October 3rd. Named in honor of PRN founder Bruce Hannon, who passed in 2024, the award celebrates organizers who inspire others to become environmental advocates. Much like Hannon's tradition of planting bur oak seedlings as "gifts to the future," the bronze acorn award—created by Champaign-Urbana artist Crystal Hartman—symbolizes lasting stewardship, mentorship, and the power of growing environmental leadership across generations.



PRN presented the first-ever *Hannon Seeds of Change* award to Pam and Lan Richart, co-founders of the Eco-Justice Collaborative in Champaign. The Richarts have partnered with PRN for over a decade, most

recently helping secure landmark legislation to protect the Mahomet Aquifer, the drinking water source for nearly one million Illinoisans. Their tireless advocacy exemplifies the spirit of the award—cultivating change through education, collaboration, and persistence. Together, they continue Bruce Hannon's legacy of turning community passion into lasting environmental protection.



PRN also honored Kelly McKay of the Quad Cities with the 2025 *River Steward* award for his extraordinary contributions to wildlife conservation in the Milan Bottoms wetlands. A biologist and lifelong

naturalist, McKay has documented over 200 species in the area—including the largest bald eagle night roost in the lower 48 states—and volunteered more than 160 hours in 2025 alone. His research and advocacy have been key to protecting these wetlands from development, ensuring the preservation of this vital ecosystem for generations to come.



WE'RE SO GRATEFUL TO PAM, LAN, AND KELLY FOR THEIR TIRELESS EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF OUR ENVIRONMENT IN ILLINOIS."

MAGGIE BRUNS

PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK IS GROWING!

THANKS TO YOUR INVESTMENT AND SUPPORT, PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK EXPANDED ITS TEAM IN 2025. WE ARE THRILLED TO INTRODUCE YOU TO THREE NEW STAFF MEMBERS AND OUR NEWEST ADDITION TO THE PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK BOARD OF DIRECTORS!



Lisa Bralts joined PRN as Communications Director in August 2025, returning to non-profit work after more than fifteen years in a variety of content and communications roles in municipal government (City of Urbana, IL), public radio and television (Illinois Public Media), and higher education (University

of Illinois). Her goal is to collaborate with her colleagues to develop and implement a powerful communications strategy for the organization, engaging deeply with both longtime and brand-new supporters of our mission to protect water, heal land, and inspire change. A resident of Urbana-Champaign since 1996, Lisa is an avid gardener, spends as much time as possible outdoors, and is a big believer in the power people have to make real change.



Omar Garcia serves as PRN's Clean Water Advocate, working to ensure all Illinois communities have access to clean, safe, and affordable water. He engages with community members, public agencies, and partner organizations to build grassroots power and advance holistic solutions to water pollution. His work

supports PRN's efforts to protect water quality, expand water access, and promote climate resilience across Illinois. Prior to joining PRN, Omar worked at the UIC Freshwater Lab and Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, where he conducted research, coordinated events, and led outreach focused on urban river access, water recycling, lead service line replacements and the environmental humanities. In his free time, Omar enjoys caring for his pets, taking the CTA Orange Line, and swimming in Lake Michigan.



Liz Mackenbach, PRN's Habitat and Biodiversity Organizer, is our most recent staff addition. Liz joined us in October 2025, bringing with her a strong background in science, education, and community leadership. She spent over a decade running a state certified childcare program, where she focused on bringing

environmental education into early childhood experiences, and is also extremely active in Southern Illinois through her service on community boards and various volunteer efforts. Liz brings a strong passion for education, a healthy environment, and equity to the PRN team. She is passionate about connecting science to action and will use her background in aquatic toxicology to empower Illinois' communities to protect people and nature from harmful pesticide exposure. Outside of work, Liz enjoys family life, swimming, gardening, and caring for animals on her small farm.



Joe Hooker joined the board in summer 2025, bringing with him decades of legal experience that includes 20 years as the Assistant City Attorney for Champaign, and over 12 years as an instructor in land use law in the U. of I. Department of Urban and Regional Planning.

Outside his professional work, Joe has lent his considerable expertise to local environmental issues, including representing a coalition of local governments in the drive to petition the EPA to designate the Mahomet Aquifer as Illinois first and only sole-source aquifer in 2015. He's also a member of the board of directors for the Champaign County Environmental Stewards, a post he's held since 2021. We're grateful Joe's passion for the land and waters of central Illinois led him to join PRN's board as well.

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