



SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Spring has finally arrived in Illinois. From north to south, vast fields of corn and soybeans are being prepared and planted for the growing season ahead, and people, especially kids, are finally able to play outside during recess, after school, and on the weekends.

To the casual observer, these scenarios are friendly, if unrelated, signs of the new season. Dig a little deeper, though, and they're much more connected—and complicated—than we might think.

WE'RE CATCHING THEIR DRIFT

Bluestem Hall Nature School is a nature-based school (offering preschool and K-1 classes) located on the southern edge of Urbana, Illinois. It shares space with the adjacent Barnhart Prairie Nature Preserve, which plays a vital part in the school's outdoor experiential learning program.

Both the school and prairie are on land set aside to conserve important elements of the native Illinois ecosystem and to foster an appreciation of nature among people: This is the legacy of the Grove and Barnhart families, who farmed and stewarded this land for more than a century. But the land, and the people enjoying it—including young children—have increasingly been impacted by pesticide drift blowing from nearby fields.

Prairie Rivers Network monitors the Bluestem Nature School and many other sites across the state—including other schools and public parks—to assess damage from chemical trespass. A recent example: A tree foliage sample was collected from a fencerow between Bluestem School and the prairie, and a sample was also obtained from a wildflower species that grows in the neighboring nature preserve. Both were analyzed for herbicide residues.

The result: Symptoms consistent with herbicide exposure were observed throughout the property, and symptoms persisted at the farthest distance (900 feet). Exposure symptoms were documented on five species of trees near the school and prairie and four species of plants growing in the prairie. Tissue sample results identified four herbicides present in the foliage samples — 2,4-D, dicamba, atrazine, and glufosinate. They were doubtless transported there via air.

MOVING TOWARD A HEALTHIER COEXISTENCE

While herbicide applicators are certainly in drift's path while they're doing their jobs, they're able to prepare by wearing appropriate protective equipment and are working inside airtight, air-conditioned cabs. Kids and others engaging in outdoor activities in areas close to farmland do not have those advantages.

"In the spring and autumn each year for the past few years, our students are out playing and learning on our outdoor school campus when suddenly, and without warning or prior notification, our teachers smell, taste, and feel chemical spray that has drifted onto our property from nearby farms where they are being applied," says Abbie Frank, Bluestem School's executive director.

“Our teachers have to run the children inside as quickly as possible so that they don't continue to breathe these chemicals, but we know that as soon as we can smell it, they are already landing on us.”

PRN believes that requiring pesticide applicators to notify participating schools, daycares, and parks within a designated area at least a day in advance of herbicide application is a logical step toward guaranteeing Illinoisans' constitutional right to a healthful environment.

While prior notification does not necessarily protect our trees and flowers from herbicide drift, it would provide an opportunity to avoid exposures while we work, play, and enjoy ourselves outdoors.

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CONSTITUTION OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS

ARTICLE XI ENVIRONMENT

SECTION 1. PUBLIC POLICY – LEGISLATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The public policy of the State and the duty of each person is to provide and maintain a healthful environment for the benefit of this and future generations. The General Assembly shall provide by law for the implementation and enforcement of this public policy.

(Source: Illinois Constitution)



DIRECTOR'S NOTE MAGGIE BRUNS

THERE IS HOPE IN ILLINOIS' CONSTITUTION

2026 has proven to be (so far, anyway) an even wilder ride than we thought possible at the end of 2025. Headlines from just the last few months tell the story: The US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) repeal of the Endangerment Finding. The US EPA's delay in cleaning up hundreds of coal ash pits. The US EPA's reapproval of a new formula of dicamba, a volatile herbicide that has caused and will cause landscape-wide harm.

The headlines are unlikely to stop coming. As I survey this rather grim national landscape, it's obvious that pushing for protections at the state level is the best defense we have against the vigorous and unprecedented efforts to strip our nation of its bedrock environmental protections.

And with that in mind, Article XI in the Illinois Constitution gives me hope. Here's why: **Illinois is among a handful of states that establishes the right to a healthful environment in its constitution.**

At Prairie Rivers Network, we take those words—**healthful environment**—incredibly seriously. But our state and local leaders need to be reminded of this constitutional guarantee and the opportunities it creates for Illinois to be a trailblazer in the response to federal threats. As you read through the spring newsletter, you'll learn how our team and our network is uniquely positioned to push local and state protections forward. Thanks for your trust and encouragement as we forge ahead together.

Onwards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maggie Bruns". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

PROTECT WATER MORE THAN A DRY SPELL: DROUGHT IN ILLINOIS

BY ROBERT HIRSCHFELD

From last autumn into early spring, Illinois was dangerously dry. Despite recent rains in parts of the state, Illinois remains in drought. Decades of policy negligence have left the state unprepared, and the crisis is only beginning.

At the drought's peak in early March, according to the US Drought Monitor, parts of 19 Central Illinois counties were in "Extreme Drought", which can lead to "major crop/pasture losses, extreme fire danger, [and] widespread water shortages or restrictions" (NOAA). At that point, 100% of Champaign County was in Extreme Drought. Statewide, 73.6% of Illinois is under some level of drought, and another 21.1% is "abnormally dry."

Wells are running low, rivers are down, and farmers are nervous heading into the growing season.

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE WEATHER

This drought must be understood in the context of Illinois' land use decisions:

- Every winter, millions of acres of bare soil are left exposed to the elements. If this drought persists, spring winds could bring more of the dangerous dust storms that have plagued the state in recent years.
- Roughly 10 million acres of Illinois farmland are equipped with subsurface tile drainage, which moves water off fields and into waterways as quickly as possible. This water—polluted with agricultural runoff—flows to the Gulf of Mexico, feeding a massive dead zone. That's water we can't get back.
- Illinois has destroyed 90% of its historic wetlands—natural sponges that could be storing water during dry periods. Of the 10% that remain, roughly 90% have been stripped of Clean Water Act protections due to recent federal rollbacks.
- Finally, hyperscale data centers—which can use millions of gallons of water per day—are muscling into communities statewide.

Sound alarming? It is. What makes it genuinely dangerous is that Illinois has no meaningful framework to manage its water supply.

Illinois has historically been water-rich, but abundance has bred complacency. The state never updated its water use laws, which remain rooted in English common law from centuries ago. In short, apart from Lake Michigan, there is no oversight, no permitting, no real management of our water. **Any landowner can pull water from a river or well and use as much as they want, until they impact another landowner's right to "reasonable use."** Conflicts are resolved in court—a slow, expensive process that does nothing to help us plan and manage water for the future.

HOLDING DATA CENTERS ACCOUNTABLE

Large water users are required by statute to report their withdrawals, but there are no penalties for failing to report, and thus no real enforcement. State officials estimate roughly 50% of large water users report their use appropriately; agricultural irrigation reporting is even lower.

The recent proliferation of data centers in Illinois has led advocates to draft and introduce **the POWER Act**, which would require data centers to disclose their water use and its impact on other users, while also ensuring they pay the true cost of their energy consumption rather than shifting it onto communities.

The POWER Act is necessary and urgent, but data centers are just one class of high-capacity user. Even if the bill passes, every other large withdrawer remains ungoverned.

WE CAN'T MANAGE WHAT WE DON'T MEASURE

Building an effective water governance system for Illinois will take time and careful thought, but there's an obvious first step. PRN is pushing legislation to enforce the state's existing reporting requirement for large water users, because we can't manage what we don't measure.

The future of water in Illinois looks very different than in the past. Even if more rain comes this spring and the drought temporarily eases, the emergency is here. Decades of policy negligence must be turned around. We must start managing this most essential of resources, and we must start now.

HEAL LAND

WETLANDS ARE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

BY NINA STRUSS

Wetlands are one of nature’s quietest—and most crucial—maintainers. They’re also in danger of disappearing entirely due to continued federal rollbacks and the resulting negative effects, including development and pollution.

PRN’s River Health and Resiliency Organizer, Nina Struss, grew up in and eventually returned to the Quad Cities area, which is home to several wetland complexes. Here she shares her thoughts about wetlands and her ongoing work with northwestern Illinois communities to protect and preserve these essential bodies.

WETLANDS ARE HEALING

My background is in nutrition. One of the first times I took a tour of Nahant Marsh (just across the Mississippi River in Davenport, IA), the education center’s executive director explained that wetlands are nature’s kidneys; they work to filter out pollutants that enter our water supply, eventually delivering a cleaner product to our rivers and subsequently our oceans. That drove home how vital their role is in a healthy landscape. Not only that: They’re also an incredible resource for flood protection. Most of our rivers are no longer able to meander freely, so relying on wetlands as pockets for flood protection is critical.

WETLANDS ARE STEADFAST

Rivers are about connection. They connect cities and towns to one another. Bridges span rivers to connect land masses. Festivals and markets connect people at riverfronts. Wetland areas, on the other hand, are literally more in the background, and are not as often frequented or even seen.

This is why more robust conversations—and in some cases, active preservation—are key right now for the wetlands we do have remaining in the Quad Cities. I believe that those who have been involved in conversations around wetlands locally understand their place in the ecosystem of preservation, and they prove to be fierce advocates for protecting these natural areas.

An example of this: Nahant Marsh used to be a sportsman’s

club, and was ultimately cleaned up through dedicated efforts from federal, state, and local organizations. Despite high levels of lead in the marsh, clean-up efforts were successful to the point where wildlife and plant life began to flourish once again. This wetland has shown drastic improvements in water quality over the years, too: staff have the data to prove it. Seeing this flourishing wetland after learning its origin story inspires me to find more opportunities to take wetlands from just surviving to thriving in our communities.

WETLANDS ARE ESSENTIAL

My biggest fear for the loss of wetlands in our Illinois landscape is the loss of water—and not just that water that sits within the wetlands. With the shifting climate leading to more frequent and intense rainfalls, we’re at higher risk of losing that water to our sewers than being able to conserve the resource within the ground, whether in the form of rain gardens, native/prairie landscapes, or wetlands. The fewer pockets of wetlands we have across our state, the greater loss of water we’ll see over the next several years—a scary situation during a time when water availability is said to be decreasing.

WETLANDS ARE COMMUNITY

Fortunately, community members in the Quad Cities area are paying attention and are understanding the value wetlands bring. A 2025 Clean River Advisory Council survey of community members revealed that those surveyed consistently ranked wetlands and/or “protecting places that flood” as a top-3 for every priority neighborhood on both sides of the river. People want these areas and what they have to offer, and value their protection.

Illinois has tragically lost most of its wetlands, so it’s important that people get out and experience a wetland however they can to better understand how meaningful taking care of those that remain really is. Learning a wetland’s story and understanding the power behind that small (or big!) pocket of water enables us to truly advocate for our wild places and the wildlife that call them home.

We just need to get out there.



INSPIRE CHANGE

ILLINOIS' BIGGEST COAL BOONDOGGLE: FIGHTING ON MANY FRONTS

BY AMANDA PANKAU

When the Prairie State Coal Plant began operating in 2012, the science was already clear: Greenhouse gas emissions from burning coal contributed significantly to climate change. Global atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentrations were 392.6 parts per million (ppm), an unprecedented level in human history, and international negotiations were underway that would eventually produce the Paris Agreement.

Yet even as the world grappled with the urgency of cutting carbon emissions, Illinois' public power utilities (including municipal electric utilities and rural electric cooperatives) bought into promises promoted by coal giant Peabody Energy, helping the company finance one of the nation's last major coal plant builds. The result was the Prairie State Energy Campus, a 1,600-megawatt coal plant and co-located underground coal mine in Washington County. This boondoggle's construction costs exceeded \$5 billion, over \$3 billion more than originally estimated.

In 2026, atmospheric CO₂ concentrations have climbed to nearly 430 ppm, a reminder that investing in coal in 2012 was a decision with consequences we now live with and must fight against.

COMMUNITY ACTION FORCES ACCOUNTABILITY

Prairie State has been top of mind across Illinois for good reason: The plant is Illinois' largest single source of air pollution, and is one of the nation's largest sources of planet-warming CO₂. And yet, remarkably, it operated illegally for 14 years without a Clean Air Act operating permit. Our partners at Sierra Club Illinois filed a 2023 lawsuit against the plant on this charge, resulting in action taken by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) late last year to issue a draft air permit. At three public hearings for the permit in early February, Prairie Rivers Network staff, members, and partners showed up to speak. Many others submitted written comments. Together, we demanded that the IL EPA finally issue the long-overdue air permit with the strongest possible pollution limits and controls.

At the same time, communities tied to Prairie State are charting a different course. Naperville and St. Charles, the two largest members of the Illinois Municipal Electric Agency (IMEA)—one of the nine public power agencies that owns the facility—

both declined to sign early long-term renewals of their power supply contract with IMEA that would lock them into Prairie State from 2035-2055. These communities deserve recognition for asking hard questions and prioritizing climate action, fiscal responsibility, and public health.

Moving forward, city councils and the boards of rural electric cooperatives must increase local oversight of their power supply, and must demand transparency from IMEA and other Prairie State owners regarding operations and decisions around the coal plant and mine.

STATE LAW SHIFTS THE LANDSCAPE

Under the 2021 Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA), Prairie State faces mandatory emissions reductions by 45% by 2035 and is required to completely eliminate carbon emissions by 2045. Rather than planning for a responsible transition to clean energy, plant owners have been pursuing carbon capture and storage, an unproven and extraordinarily expensive technology. Notably, carbon capture would not eliminate other harmful air and water pollutants or reduce the monumental amounts of coal ash that this plant produces.

2025's Clean and Reliable Grid Accountability (CRGA) Act will also help guide the future of Prairie State. The CRGA Act requires public power utilities, like the owners of Prairie State, to develop Integrated Resource Plans (IRP), an energy plan that will "evaluate energy supply and demand in order to meet long-term energy needs while minimizing costs and complying with federal and state environmental requirements..."

THE ROAD AHEAD

Decisions about the air permit, power supply contracts, compliance with CEJA, carbon capture proposals, and IRP energy planning will shape Illinois' energy future for decades to come, and they will all require sustained public education and engagement. Contacting legislators, submitting public comments, attending hearings, supporting local renewable energy projects, and urging local leaders to move away from coal have been and will continue to be essential.

Together, we can ensure Illinois moves away from the negative climate, environmental, and health impacts of coal and toward clean air, clean water, and clean energy.

WHY I GIVE KIM CURTIS



During a mid-life “re-assessment” in my forties, I decided to quit “everything” and devote myself to environmental conservation. I’d worked for over a decade as a costume designer in the San Francisco Bay Area and upon moving to Champaign, had expanded into painting, exhibiting with a gallery in Chicago for fifteen years. But my college environmental science

class back in the late 1980’s had transformed my view of the world, and as awareness of the climate crisis grew, so did my curiosity and feelings of urgency.

Sitting in my studio, I began to mentally prepare my résumé: Office skills? Not great. Expertise in law or science? Nope. Work experience in anything applicable? Not really. What could I possibly offer an environmental organization that they can’t get elsewhere? As I further inventoried my skill-set and experience, I arrived at my strongest potential contribution: my ability to research and propel environmental stories through visual arts and craft.

I’ve spent my entire adult life distilling scripts, research, and observation into visual imagery. I’ve investigated countless materials, techniques, and approaches in order to push narratives and discussion. I’ve toured garbage dumps, ice caves, and many places in-between. I’ve been a professional artist for 41 years.

I don’t work for Prairie Rivers Network and I never sent them my résumé. Instead, I quietly gave myself a job: to continue refining and revising my visual language and to donate proceeds directly to their work. Over the years, I’ve gotten to know some of the amazing staff and have immense respect for each of them and what they bring to their job. As a National Wildlife Federation affiliate, PRN’s profile is national but their office is right here in Champaign where I can see their work take shape and join them at gatherings or county board meetings. I learn from their research, action alerts, and campaigns, and am inspired by their dogged perseverance and ultimately, their successes.

In short, Prairie Rivers Network rises to the challenge every single time. Their work is vital to making sure Illinois remains a healthy, vibrant, and inspiring place for all. I’m grateful they can do the work I’m not trained for, and that I can contribute in the way I know best.

See more of Kim Curtis’ artwork by visiting www.kimcurtis.net



**Come see Kim’s work in person at
GROUNDWORK: Land, Water, and
Opportunity for Illinois’ Landscape.**

Prairie Rivers Network and our friends at the Cohen Exhibition Workshop in Urbana present an exhibition exploring the future of the Illinois landscape—one shaped by restoration, resilience, and possibility.

**Open Fridays, April 9-May 29, 5-8pm
+Special Programming TBA
At The Cohen Exhibition Workshop
136 W Main St. Urbana, IL**

This exhibition invites viewers to see the Illinois landscape not only as it is—but as it could become.

2025 ANNUAL REPORT TOGETHER, WE PERSERVERED

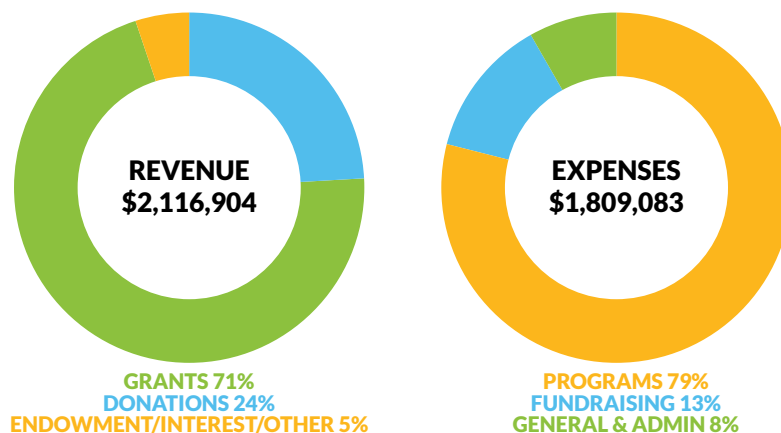
Like most environmental nonprofits, Prairie Rivers Network navigated severe challenges over the course of the year. The overnight pivot from a place of opportunity, implementing the Inflation Reduction Act to dealing with an unrecognizable and unpredictable federal landscape was staggering. The new administration's attempts to slow progress had an immediate effect as our bedrock environmental protections were undermined and dismantled at a rapid pace.

IF WE HAVE LEARNED ANYTHING FROM 2025, IT'S THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY.

In 2025, our network didn't falter. In fact, we actually grew in these challenging circumstances, securing new funders to support our work while also recruiting new staff and board members to help meet this moment. Despite our limited resources, we remained strategic and nimble, knowing we couldn't fight every fire. Instead, our network pushed forward together, achieved significant policy victories, deepened our implementation efforts and inspired conversations to make Illinois more resilient in the face of opposition. We showed how our community-powered efforts here in Illinois can still move the country forward.

Ultimately, we learned our network—this community—was made for these tough times. In the face of so much uncertainty, we doubled down on our commitment to our mission to protect water, heal land, and inspire change.

FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT



VIEW OUR FULL 2025 ANNUAL REPORT AT
[PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG/ANNUALREPORT](https://prairierivers.org/annualreport)

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2026 CHARITABLE DEDUCTIONS: NEW TAX DEDUCTIONS FOR NON-ITEMIZED FILERS

Starting in 2026, non-itemized filers can now benefit from new tax codes which allow you to deduct \$1,000 (single filer) or \$2,000 (joint filers) for cash gifts to non-profit organizations like Prairie Rivers Network. If you take the standard deduction, this is a new opportunity to save while benefiting Prairie Rivers Network.

Please reach out to a tax professional to talk about all the recent changes to tax provisions that may impact your charitable giving.



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