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Our waterways need each and every one of us. Join us in celebrating the Freedom of Water today.

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Freedom of water is not just an issue in our waterways. It’s a freedom of spirit. A freedom of joy. A freedom to feel the coolness of fresh, clean water. A freedom to catch a fish. A freedom to enjoy the great outdoors. A freedom to respect and defend our waterways.

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Inspired by the Freedom of Water
By Allison Werner

At the Baraboo Riverfest to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the removal of the last dam on the Baraboo River, I was struck by how this one event encompassed the outcomes we strive for in our work. Baraboo’s success story includes a free-flowing river with sturgeon and diverse fish species, better access to the river and its history, and a collaboration among local partners to accomplish long-term goals. Local and state leaders, like our former board member Joe VanBerkel, and many others worked for decades to convince the community of the plan to remove the dams and raise the money to do it. Removing dams like those on the Baraboo is not without controversy. However, past mayors and community leaders envisioned the long-term ecological and economic benefits dam removal would bring to Sauk County. And it has paid off. We now see the ways the river restoration helps Baraboo thrive economically and environmentally.

The future the River Alliance team envisions is a Wisconsin that is thriving because everyone has access to clean and plentiful water. To achieve this goal, we need a better way to manage our water resources. We are building the road map for a new system with our Wisconsin Water Agenda.

We also believe we need to build common ground to prove that clean water is a non-partisan issue. As we help local leaders add Clean Water Now referendum questions to their ballots this spring, it will show that the people of Wisconsin want their elected leaders to take action on the water challenges we face.

We are finding common ground with farmers across the state. We cannot protect public health and the natural environment without considering farming’s impacts on our shared water resources. That’s why we collaborate with producer-led organizations like the Sauk County Soil & Water Improvement Group, a community of farmers and partners who share a common goal of improving our soil and water quality through soil health and other conservation practices.

This future needs you. Get involved with your local river, watershed, or farmer-led group, volunteer to monitor our rivers for invasive species, and thank the farmers in your community when they implement conservation practices like cover crops. You can also renew your membership to the River Alliance and use your Freedom of Water membership sticker as a conversation starter with friends and family about the importance of having the freedom to drink, fish, and swim in clean water in Wisconsin.

In Baraboo, I had the pleasure to meet 8-year old Lucas who found a dollar on the ground and chose to give it to the River Alliance to help us protect rivers and all the waters connected to them. Lucas gives me hope for our future.

Why Wisconsin’s Spills Law protects our water and our economy
By Bill Davis

For more than 40 years, Wisconsin’s Spills Law has protected our water and land. It requires people and businesses to report a release into the environment of anything that could be hazardous to people, plants, or animals. It gives the Department of Natural Resources the authority to take steps to remedy the problem and require the responsible party to contain and clean up the spill.

Now the Spills Law is under attack. Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce is suing the DNR to gut our Spills Law. River Alliance of Wisconsin and four other organizations and individuals, represented by Midwest Environmental Advocates, petitioned to be a party to this lawsuit. While that motion to intervene was denied by Waukesha County Judge Bohren on September 17, the judge allowed Midwest Environmental Advocates to file an amicus brief to explain the implications of WMC’s lawsuit.

Wisconsin’s Spills Law makes common sense and is grounded in what we all learned in kindergarten: if you make a mess, you are responsible to clean it up. Put another way, no one has the right to contaminate our water. Business owners in particular have the ethical responsibility to understand their operation well enough to know whether their actions could create a hazard to others. The law is intentionally broad and comprehensive. We need our DNR to act quickly to make sure spills are contained and cleaned up by those responsible.

Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce is a trade association that claims to represent the interests of Wisconsin business. They are very active in elections and lobbying the legislature. One would think a powerful business lobby in Wisconsin would make clean water a top priority. We would not have our dairy, beer, paper, food production, or tourism industries without clean water. Unfortunately, WMC has a long history of doing the exact opposite through actions like this lawsuit to undo the Spills Law.

This lawsuit is about PFAS, or “forever chemicals”, which have been linked to cancer and other serious health effects. However, the impact of the lawsuit is much broader and would remove the protections we now have from a spill of any hazardous substance. This means DNR will not be able to act quickly to contain spills, and you and I will be on the hook for the clean-up instead of the people who caused the spill.

For updates on this lawsuit, please follow us on social media.

Show your support for River Alliance and the Freedom of Water
By Karen Anderson

This fall, there will be two easy ways to show your support for River Alliance of Wisconsin.

In fall, we will ask many of our supporters to renew their membership with River Alliance. New this fall, when you join or renew your membership, we will send you a Freedom of Water sticker that’s perfect for your water bottle or tackle box.

Because you care deeply about freedom to fish, paddle, and swim in clean water, it’s a great time to renew your support. It’s one way you can show that you believe in the essential right to clean water.

Save the date for Giving Tuesday on November 30. Giving Tuesday is a global day of generosity. Last year, donors kicked off the holiday giving season by contributing over $30,000 to River Alliance. It’s a great day to make an online donation and encourage your friends to join you in your support for the network that empowers people to protect and restore Wisconsin’s water.

Follow River Alliance on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to share alerts on how to give for Giving Tuesday. Every time you like and share a post, it helps us reach more people who want to protect our water.

Show us where your sticker ends up! Post a photo to social media and tag us with the #FreedomOfWater hashtag.
Clean Water Now referendums are coming soon to many Wisconsin ballots

By Johnson Bridgwater

On the next Election Day, April 5, 2022, many Wisconsinites around the state will be able to vote YES for clean water. The Clean Water Now referendum question is a simple one: Should the State of Wisconsin establish a right to clean water to protect human health, the environment, and the diverse cultural and natural heritage of Wisconsin?

It won’t be the first time voters went to the polls to vote YES on advisory referendums for clean water protections. Voters in Marquette County (73%), Portage County (77%), and Wood County (76%) approved Clean Water Now referendums in April 2021. These results show a clear, bipartisan desire for better water protections.

The process for getting an advisory referendum question on ballots last April had several steps, including finding a county board champion who could help introduce the question to a committee, rally support among other elected officials, and support the approval of the question by the full county board.

One local leader was Wood County Supervisor Bill Leichtnam. Committee, rally support among other elected officials, and support the approval of the question by the full county board.

One local leader was Wood County Supervisor Bill Leichtnam who explained that he helped put the question on ballots in his county so that “...residents can affirm their desire to protect our most precious natural resource AND implore Wisconsin manufacturers, businesses, farm organizations, legislators, and each individual to do their part in renewing our waters and keeping them clean far into the future.”

Through Clean Water Now referendums, Wisconsinites will use their voting power to send a clear message to our state’s leaders that water protection is a bipartisan priority.

Clean Water Now is more than a simple campaign slogan. There’s not a corner of our state that isn’t facing some kind of clean water challenge. Whether it’s algae blooms, fish advisories, PFAS, nitrates, or lead pipes, the health of our families and our local economies face urgent threats.

Despite the urgency of our need to protect our water, our state’s elected officials aren’t doing enough to make clean water a priority.

While there were some small strides forward for water protection in our state’s budget, most of the water-related budget requests from conservation groups and Governor Evers were either not funded, underfunded, or limited to only the next fiscal biennium by the Joint Finance Committee. State funding for lead pipe removal, polluted water well compensation grants, and PFAS testing and removal falls far short of what we need to protect human health.

State elected officials must move past divisive partisanship and hear directly from voters that the need for clean water unites us as a state.

Meet Johnson Bridgwater

Originally from Minneapolis, family connections took Johnson to Oklahoma where he built a diverse 20+ year career focused on both conservation and environmental work, including fieldwork, community organizing, and state policy and advocacy. Most recently, he served as Director of the Oklahoma Chapter of Sierra Club.

After marrying a “Wausau expat” living in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Johnson and Lisa began spending as much time as possible in Wisconsin, for nearly the entire year of 2020.

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"As soon as I started visiting Wisconsin regularly a few years ago, I knew immediately that I wanted this to be my next home. Every time I came here, I interacted with water one way or another that left a near-permanent smile on my face every trip. So, when the opportunity came up to join River Alliance as their Water Advocates Organizer, it absolutely felt like fate and the fulfillment of the next phase of my life.”

Local leaders know the problems their communities face and are looking for ways to pressure state officials to do more. One of those leaders from the April 2021 referendum campaign is Marquette County Board Supervisor Al Rosenthal.

“Our state legislators knew that clean water was important and introduced 13 water bills in 2020, which passed the assembly, but never were introduced in the senate, and therefore never went anywhere,” said Rosenthal. “The Marquette County referendum will let our legislators know how important clean water is, and we need to act now, before it is too late.”

Add the Clean Water Now referendum question to your county’s ballot

Local leaders like you can volunteer to help add referendum language to your ballot. River Alliance of Wisconsin can support volunteer county campaign leaders in navigating the process by identifying county board members who can champion the question and guide the action through the committee and full-board approval process. That process begins now and will be complete in January. February and March will be the time to make your friends and neighbors aware of the referendum question and why they should vote YES.

Why Clean Water Now is a priority for River Alliance

We know from the success in Marquette, Portage, and Wood counties that Wisconsinites want a direct way to show why clean water is important to our lives, our economies, and our enjoyment of Wisconsin’s natural heritage.

We’ve heard your concerns and your stories about water pollution and your frustration with politicians who have the power to do something about it but fail to take meaningful action. When we support local leaders to add the Clean Water Now referendum question to your ballot, we are taking a step towards direct democracy that gives voters like you a voice on Election Day.

Please sign up for email updates at VoteForCleanWater.com. Follow @CleanWaterNowWI and #CleanWaterNowWI on Instagram and Twitter. Stay in touch because we all know “you can’t ‘Wisconsin’ without clean water.

To become a campaign leader in your county, contact Water Advocates Organizer Johnson Bridgwater, 608-237-2424 x 115, jbridgwater@wisconsinrivers.org for a toolkit and ways to connect with other volunteers in your community.

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Volunteers play a key role in AIS monitoring
By Ellen Voss

It was a busy summer for the AIS team, and unfortunately, invasive snails were busy moving around the landscape as well.

Early this summer, two new populations of New Zealand mudsnails were found in Dane County, one of which was discovered by Rock River Coalition Water Action Volunteers during routine stream monitoring. At our eighth annual Snapshot Day, La Crosse volunteers (led by our summer intern, Ty Tretter) found faucet snails on Goose Island, a popular waterfowl hunting destination, for the first time. During a Project Riverine Early Detectors paddle trip with Viterbo University, student monitors discovered faucet snails in the Black River Bottoms in La Crosse.

It’s always disheartening to find new invasive populations, but these early detection efforts give us our best chance at keeping them from spreading further. Extra eyes on the water make a big difference. Thank you to all the dedicated volunteer monitors who are helping protect our waterways!

To learn more about New Zealand mudsnails and faucet snails and their impacts, visit wisconsinrivers.org/homepage/aquatic-invasive-species

Clear Water Farms finds Common Ground
By Michael Tiboris

Our Clear Water Farms program is designed to build durable relationships between farmers and our members, expanding the coalition of Wisconsinites committed to protecting our water. This includes integrating emerging farmer watershed groups into our network of lake and river groups.

We’re doing innovative, partnered events that bring farmers to the river and paddles and farm field days. Meanwhile, we’re advocating for specific state policy changes that will control agricultural pollution and reward the farmers who are taking the lead on improving soil and water health.

By helping farmers implement and share their water stewardship achievements, we help make water protection a norm of doing business on the farm while protecting rural public health and the stability of our aquatic ecosystems.

Fools’ Flotilla
On August 29, hundreds of people celebrated the Yahara River as a part of this year’s Orton-Front Festival. River Alliance of Wisconsin is proud to continue this tradition along with support from sponsors including Heartwood Tree Company, Lauer Realty Group, Madison Gas and Electric, Sitka Salmon Shares, WVMO-FM, and Robert Sawicki.

Baraboo’s free-flowing river celebration
On October 2, we joined the Friends of the Baraboo River to celebrate the 20th anniversary of removing the last dam on the river. The day was full of family-friendly activities, paddles to a new boat landing, a sturgeon release, and even virtual guided history tours on the riverwalk using QR codes that allow visitors to listen to recordings featuring the voice of former River Alliance board member Lindsay Wood Davis.

THANK YOU:
LYNNE DIEBEL
River Alliance staff and board are grateful for Lynne Diebel’s board service over the past two and a half years. Wisconsin’s waters benefitted from her tenure as board secretary, her reliable thoughtful input and ready smile, and dedication to local groups. Lynne’s joyful energy and enthusiastic support for rivers was an inspiration on the River Alliance Board! Thank you, Lynne!