What’s inside

Clean Water Now referendum campaign wins big in two Wisconsin counties

Renewing River Alliance’s commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion

Two producer-led agriculture groups that are farming for clean water
Film shorts on the Wisconsin Water Agenda

Wool, toy trucks, birthday cake sprinkles... not the first things you’d think of as tools to talk about protecting our water. With the help of stop-motion film artists, we took complex ideas about flooding and agricultural pollution and put them into short films about the Wisconsin Water Agenda.

The twelve elements of the Wisconsin Water Agenda describe a comprehensive, integrated management approach to water that could achieve our human health and ecological goals. The films talk about the systemic change we need to better manage our water.

Visit WisconsinWaterAgenda.org to find these videos and more information about how the Agenda guides our work with watershed-based partners in Wisconsin.

How we’re making allyship a priority for our Alliance

By Allison Werner

Over the last year, our staff and board have been learning and reflecting on what it means to be a Just, Equitable, Diverse and Inclusive organization. We’ve had the honor of being in the first Cream City Conservation JEDI Cohort, guided by August Ball. We have invested in this work because we acknowledge that the conservation movement in general, and River Alliance specifically, has been a predominantly white space. Without diverse perspectives, the decisions we make as an organization will end up reinforcing our current, unjust system.

For River Alliance to be a strong organization and accomplish our mission of empowering people to protect and restore our waters, we have to evaluate how we accomplish our work and evolve our methods. We are proud of our history of working behind the scenes to build the capacity of local groups and lift up their water quality challenges and successes. We were intentional in bringing diverse perspectives together to form the Wisconsin Water Agenda. However, we know we need to take a deeper look at our organization and set goals for our future.

Our JEDI work is laying the foundation for our next strategic plan. In 2023, we will celebrate our 30th anniversary and set our vision for our next 30 years. Wisconsin’s waters have changed since we began in 1993. The pressures on this fragile resource are only going to increase. To succeed in having a healthy ecosystem with clean rivers, lakes, and drinking water for all Wisconsinites, we need to be a leader in welcoming all communities to come together to develop the solutions to our water challenges.

Our first step is to design diversity and inclusion plans to create an inclusive workplace and organization. Our staff and board have spent the last few months developing our work plan and will have a road map to share with you later this summer. The plan will include measures we can track so we can be transparent about our progress.

There will be ways for you to get involved. Please attend one of our River Rat Chats around the state to share your local water issues and provide input on River Alliance’s work. As always, be sure you’re getting our e-newsletter for updates on what’s to come for all of us as allies working together for clean water.

Looking back on recent highs and lows of state policy on clean water

By Bill Davis

How it started: the Year of Clean Drinking Water

Since the Governor’s Year of Clean Drinking Water and the Speaker’s Water Quality Task Force hearings in 2019, Wisconsin communities continue to wait for help with their drinking water.

Approximately 100,000 people have high nitrate levels in their water wells. More communities are testing their municipal water to find the extent of PFAS pollution. Wausau and Black Earth Creek have joined the list of PFAS hot spots that includes Marinette, Peshtigo, Madison, La Crosse and Eau Claire. It’s clear that urgent action is needed.

How it’s going: little legislative progress

On the plus side: The Speaker’s Water Quality Task Force recommendations sparked Assembly Bill 727, which provides a small amount of funding for pilot projects aimed at commercial nitrogen optimization pilots and cover crop insurance premium rebates. It also creates a hydrogeologist position in the Geological and Natural History Survey to focus on developing groundwater resource information. Governor Evers signed the bill; however, there is no funding to pay for the position.

On the negative side: The legislature failed to amend the Well Compensation program in Assembly Bill 728 to make funding available to thousands of additional Wisconsinites with nitrate-contaminated wells. The CLEAR Act, which would have provided resources and action aimed at PFAS, did not even receive a public hearing in either the Assembly or the Senate.

While they would not act to protect public health, the legislature did take the time to pass Senate Bill 900 that gives away public lakebed lands. We are happy to report that Governor Evers vetoed this bill.

The Department of Natural Resources sent three major rules to the DNR Board in February to set standards for PFAS pollution in drinking water and surface water and set groundwater standards for certain PFAS and more than a dozen other substances including some pesticides and heavy metals. The DNR Board rejected the groundwater rule, passed the drinking water rule (but increased the standard from 20 ppt to 70 ppt), and passed the surface water rule.

In a nutshell, the legislature and natural resources board failed this session in their responsibility to protect the people of Wisconsin and the environment from clear and real threats.

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Two producer-led agriculture groups that are farming for clean water
By Michael Tiboris

About 40% of Wisconsin’s land area is farmland, and farming has an impact on the quality and quantity of Wisconsin’s water. Confronting this reality has always been a tightrope for environmental organizations. While we need urgent action to reverse the steady and well-documented degradation of ground and surface water, we also need substantial participation by the agriculture industry to continue farming in a way that preserves and protects our water.

A trend that gives us hope is the growing number of producer-led watershed groups. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection agency has given start-up grants to small groups of farmers who are organizing themselves to implement and promote regenerative agriculture practice and on-farm research and to influence their peers. There are now 41 of these groups throughout the state.

This model should look familiar to River Alliance members. Small, local, and energized groups of like-minded people working together to improve the world for themselves and their neighbors is really the only fully effective method of making change. Support from government and markets from afar helps, but those of us who have worked for decades to build strong local conservation organizations know that community-based groups form the strongest and most lasting way to move the needle on water protection.

River Alliance is intentionally developing relationships with these farmer groups because they are watershed groups. They’re full of the same kinds of extraordinary people who commit their time and talents to protecting their watersheds as other local water protection groups in the state. It is worth your while to find out if there is a producer-led group in your watershed and to reach out to them. See if you or your local group can form a partnership with them. We’re stronger and more effective together.

Two producer-led groups are great examples of what’s working in Wisconsin.

The Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation, or EPPIC, started in 2018 in Marathon County. It has a diverse and active membership that includes farms of very different scales and production styles as well as a local inputs (fertilizer and pesticide) dealer. But they’ve also welcomed community organizations and nonprofits like River Alliance to the table.

“Farmers want to leave a legacy of impact and live up to the name of being good stewards of the land,” said Matt Oehmichen, EPPIC advisory council member and co-owner of Short Lane Ag Supply. “And our role at EPPIC is to show them how by continually seeking to improve their fields, eliminate runoff, and enhance the environment with things like pollinator habitat, continuous cover, building soil health, and reducing inputs.”

EPPIC has encouraged a steady growth in cover cropping and reduced tillage and is taking careful measurements to show that there has been no significant loss in yields. They are uncommonly eager to experiment with anything that might improve water quality and are excited to publicly advocate for what they’re doing.

Their efforts caught the attention of researchers from the UW’s Grasslands 2.0 project and Discovery Farms programs which are working with EPPIC to collect data and establish a permanent Cloverbelt learning hub in the area.

On the natural and effective partnership with River Alliance, Oehmichen said, “we can’t live without clean water and we can’t live without agriculture. We have overlapping goals, and it makes perfect sense to be together.”

Long-time local advocates for regenerative farming in Sauk County started the Sauk Soil and Water Improvement Group, or SSWIG, in 2020 to protect the Baraboo River watershed. Many of the farmers in the group have practiced no-till agriculture and cover cropping for decades, but the goal is to get many more farmers to try these practices for the first time.

“Sauk County is home to a lot of conservation work, but our waters are still polluted,” said Ron Bula of Bula’s Pleasant Valley Farm, one of the group’s founding members. “We’re attempting to restore the streams to what they were originally.”

Like EPPIC, SSWIG is special both for its inclusion of other organizations and a desire to engage non-farmers in the project of changing the landscape.

“We want people to realize how much better [regenerative farming] can be for the soil and water than ‘conventional’ high horsepower, high fossil fuel farming that loses a lot of soil into the water,” says SSWIG member Ron Schoepp of Schoepp Farms.

River Alliance, through our Clear Water Farms program, is developing relationships with SSWIG, EPPIC, and other producer-led watershed groups to fold them into the existing network of local groups that has long been the backbone of Wisconsin’s water conservation achievements.

“River Alliance has been around longer than we have,” says Bula. “It’s very helpful because you have connections we don’t, in the legislature and the conservation community, that are like-minded. We have to partner with organizations that are working toward our common goals.”
We welcome Bill and Luke, new members of our Board of Directors!

**Bill Coady**
Bill’s love of numbers and volunteerism for River Alliance led him to his new position as Board Treasurer. He retired from a long career at Oscar Meyer in Madison where he learned about the big picture of food production, agriculture, and the Wisconsin economy. Bill is an avid outdoors enthusiast.

**Luke Zahm**
Luke is the owner and chef of the Driftless Cafe in Viroqua and is a passionate advocate for good food and paddling Wisconsin’s waters. He is also the host of Wisconsin Foodie on PBS Wisconsin.

**Cathy Dow**
River Alliance of Wisconsin is grateful for the incredible work of our business manager, Cathy Dow, who took a big life leap to move to the west coast. She now serves as the Finance and Administration Director of the Mount Saint Helens Institute where we have no doubt her knack for details and spreadsheet skills are making a difference in the state of Washington.

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**We welcome Bill and Luke, new members of our Board of Directors!**

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**Two more counties vote YES to Clean Water Now**

*By Johnson Bridgewater*

Success! Voters in Eau Claire and La Crosse Counties overwhelmingly voted YES to the Clean Water Now advisory referendum questions on their ballots this spring.

The question read “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?”

Voters in Eau Claire County approved the referendum by 79%, and in La Crosse County by 86%. Eau Claire and La Crosse voters joined those in other counties to show bipartisan support for the right to clean water. In the Spring 2021 elections, voters in Marquette County (73%), Portage County (77%) and Wood County (78%) approved referendums.

We’re working with county board members and local clean water advocates to put this question on ballots to let voters show their nonpartisan support for better water protection policies in the state. While the referendum is non-binding, results are sent to the Governor, Wisconsin Counties Association, and state legislators who represent voters in those counties.

There is more to come this year. Counties are lining up to add the question to ballots in the fall election. Other counties are working on clean water resolutions. These local actions are a way to affirm the urgent need to take action for water protection, especially for Wisconsin families who have nitrate- and PFAS-contaminated water wells.

Please join us. Get updates on the counties that will include the Clean Water Now question on fall ballots: bit.ly/CleanWaterNowWIUpdates. If you have questions or would like to help encourage your county to take action, contact me at jbridgetwater@wisconsinrivers.org.

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**Volunteer to help protect your favorite stream**

*By Ellen Voss*

If you’re itching to get outside after a long, cold winter cooped up, there are lots of ways to get out on the water and protect your favorite stream at the same time! Get in touch with me at evoss@wisconsinrivers.org to learn more about these hands-on AIS volunteer opportunities that can be done solo or with your friends this summer.

**Sign, sign, everywhere a sign!**

Know of a stream access point or landing that could use some invasive species signage? See an old sign that needs to be repaired or replaced? Are you handy with a saw and drill and want to help build wader wash stations? Be in touch if you’d be interested in installing new signs, helping with maintenance, or building new stations.

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**The Big Share was a big success**

*By Karen Anderson*

Can you believe how many people chipped in for The Big Share? Donors supported River Alliance of Wisconsin to the tune of over $18,000! Your collective support blew us away.

Lots of great things happened during The Big Share. Mel Vollbrecht and Allison Werner’s fundraising pages surpassed their goals. Communications Director Stacy Harbaugh emceed The Big Share Live’s live stream and showed River Alliance’s Wisconsin Water Agenda videos. Clear Water Farms Program Director Mike Tiboris showed off his banjo playing skills in a live performance with his musician friends, Old Gray Cats. River Alliance of Wisconsin is deeply grateful for everyone who gave during The Big Share, who pooled their funds together to match donations on March 1, and for those who kept giving to help us top $18,000.

Looking ahead in 2022, we are pleased to welcome returning and new annual sponsors of River Alliance of Wisconsin. Annual sponsors support our mission with a yearly gift and enjoy recognition in our statewide events and digital and print publications.

If you would like to become an annual sponsor of River Alliance, please contact me at kanderson@wisconsinrivers.org.