



MILWAUKEE
RIVERKEEPER®

RIVER CURRENTS

A PUBLICATION OF MILWAUKEE RIVERKEEPER

SPRING 2021



Milwaukee River Basin Scores D+

Stalling grades do not indicate lack of progress

Each year, Milwaukee Riverkeeper releases an annual Report Card, detailing the health of the Milwaukee River Basin's three major waterways. In 2019, our water quality remained firmly below average scoring a D+, with less than a one-percent increase in the grade from 2018. Despite a stalling grade, we remain hopeful as many efforts are being made to improve water quality.

Intense and frequent rainfall, failing infrastructure, land-use practices and human activities all negatively affect water quality and we see this reflected in the low bacteria, phosphorus, specific conductivity and turbidity scores in the Basin.

While still failing to meet the water quality standards, phosphorus grades did see some improvement in both the Menomonee and Milwaukee River Watersheds in 2019. Data for the report is collected in large part by Milwaukee Riverkeeper's trained community scientists, as well as Ozaukee County Planning and Parks, Milwaukee.

Metropolitan Sewerage District, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Committee. To calculate the grade, we compare the data to federal and state standards for water quality, and follow other available guidance. -- *continued on page 3*

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Message from the Executive Director



Dear Friend of the Waters,

As I write, winter's grip seems to be loosening and our record snow levels are melting fast. The shining sun brings thoughts of warmer days and anticipation for more time spent outdoors. Renewal is in the air. There even seems to be a light at the end of the global pandemic tunnel and it feels like we may soon take a much needed breath of hope.

At this time every year, the team at Milwaukee Riverkeeper finds itself deep in planning for the upcoming river season. There is no doubt 2021 will be a busy one with something for everyone, including expanded water quality monitoring, new virtual learning (school lessons, movies, panels), workshops, paddles, hikes, fishing clinics, cleanups, the Boat Parade and more. Our river season will culminate in a special membership event to remember the last 25 years of working towards swimmable, fishable, drinkable waterways and to launch us into the next 25 years.

With a cautious and mindful approach, our 26th Annual Milwaukee Riverkeeper Spring Cleanup will take place on April 24, 2021. The inside spread of this edition of our newsletter contains more details about the changes to the cleanup this year to follow COVID safety protocols. To make this event a success, we need all participants to adhere to the plan. That means, mask-up, spread out, wash hands, and of course be kind to one another. After our cleanup is done and because our waste streams are fatter from to-go containers, PPE and single-use products from COVID, our natural areas will need more long-term and continued care. Our Adopt-A-River program provides opportunity to protect and restore our waterways all season long.

On the advocacy side of things, a big priority this year includes the important work to restore the Milwaukee Estuary Area of Concern (AOC) and remove legacy contamination from our industrial past. Our work on the AOC spans over a decade, including advocating for the community to come together and partner on a collaborative approach that would allow for the restoration to happen faster. This is a generational opportunity we are pleased to see move forward. For more about our advocacy priorities, see the Riverkeeper Watch and our Advocacy Rollup.

I want to close with a huge Thank You! to our volunteers, members and supporters who stuck with us through these trying times. We could not do the work we do without all of the generous support we receive from our friends. It is humbling to think of the time, talent and

treasure given to us. I also want to share immense gratitude with my team - I am truly amazed by the dedication from the Riverkeeper team during this trying time. I am so lucky to work with such a talented bunch.

If you want to help us work toward swimmable, fishable, drinkable waterways, please get involved in our programming, share our work with a friend, attend an event, take up a new practice or habit to care for our waterways and donate to Milwaukee Riverkeeper today.

Please give to the waterways we love, so together, we may work towards a swimmable, fishable, drinkable future for people from ALL walks of life to enjoy.

To healthy communities and free flowing rivers,

Jennifer Bolger Breceda

Executive Director



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www.milwuakeeriverkeeper.org/board

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WE'RE RECRUITING!

All Aboard: New Faces at MRK!

CESAR CASTILLO

WATER & OUTREACH PROGRAM ASSISTANT, PUBLIC ALLY



MEET CESAR!

What's your biggest pet peeve?
#unbothered

What was the turning point that made you become an environmentalist?
Watching a documentary about plastics and how little of it actually gets recycled.

What's your best memory from childhood? Growing up on the same block as my cousins and playing soccer in our backyards.

If you had to be a walleye or a catfish, which would you be and why? I think I would be the walleye because it doesn't have whiskers and I don't really grow facial hair.

REBECCA BIGGS

WATER QUALITY ASSISTANT, AMERICORPS

What's your best memory from childhood?
School field trips were always the best! One of my favorite field trips was a visit to Old World Wisconsin in the 4th grade.

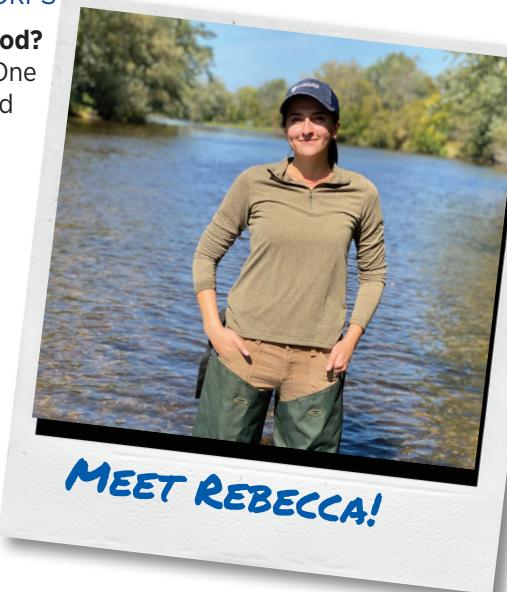
If you had to be a walleye or a catfish, which would you be and why?
Walleye! It reminds me of fish fries and going fishing often with my dad as a kid. To me, growing up, it was an iconic Wisconsin fish.

What's been your favorite experience at Milwaukee Riverkeeper?

I love going out into the field and examining the quality of our watershed firsthand. To me, there's nothing more peaceful than standing in the middle of a stream in hip waders.

What are you most looking forward to this year?

My partner and I have been working on renovating the 1928 duplex we live in, and this year I hope to see some of the projects get finished.



MEET REBECCA!

continued from cover -- Our Report Card dives deep into challenges seen throughout the Basin and highlights trends seen in each individual watershed and subwatershed. For example, rainfall in 2019, exceeded the record set in 2018, and was the wettest year in recorded history for both Wisconsin and the Midwest! Wetter seasons and record high water levels in Lake Michigan make the effects of climate change increasingly present. The 2019 Report Card includes an article examining climate change and local impacts water quality.

While it's easy to be dispirited, it's important to remember that, like our own health, river health is the result of decades of choices. Despite grades that are lower than we'd like, stormwater projects are being constructed by municipalities and community groups, farmers are working together to improve soil health and reduce runoff in a more coordinated way, and Milwaukee is finally getting federal funds to clean up legacy contamination in the Milwaukee River Estuary Area of Concern. Learn more about these efforts in a new feature in this year's report by Riverkeeper, Cheryl Nenn.

We'd like to thank our volunteer water quality monitors and partners, their dedication and collaboration makes this work possible.

For more information and to read the full report visit: bit.ly/19MRKReport

This year's report is presented with special thanks to our program sponsor:



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HELPING OUR WATERS THRIVE SINCE '95

26TH ANNUAL MILWAUKEE RIVERKEEPER SPRING CLEANUP

SATURDAY, APRIL 24, 2021

As we launch Milwaukee Riverkeeper into the next 25 years, it seems fitting that we continue our journey, where it all started, at our annual river cleanup. Twenty-five years ago, Milwaukee

Riverkeeper started when a group of friends and neighbors came together to care for our precious waterways.

While we're excited to host another community-wide effort to restore our rivers, we're taking steps to mindfully proceed, with safety at the center of our plan. That means our 26th Annual Milwaukee Riverkeeper Spring Cleanup will look a little different from years past.

We're limiting the number of volunteers and staggering start times at each cleanup site, making pre-registration required. This means no one can walk-up to a site the day of the event and participate. Volunteers will also be required to:

- Wear a mask
- Remain socially distant
- Use hand sanitizer

To register visit: bit.ly/MRKCleanup26

ROCK THE STREAM

After the event you're invited to celebrate with us as we Rock the Stream with our friends at Rock the Green. Enjoy some great music and performances from the comfort of your couch! Hear from your friends at Milwaukee Riverkeeper and other local leaders about the work happening to care for our environment. Stay tuned for details.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE AT HOME

Whether you join us on April 26th or not, you can help protect and restore our waterways on your own, all year long. Here are 6 easy ways to care for our waterways at home:

- Install a rain barrel
- Create a rain garden
- Hold a DIY Cleanup
- Reduce single-use plastic use
- Keep storm drains clear
- Limit use of pest and weedkillers



CLEANUP LOCATIONS

MENOMONEE RIVER VALLEY

Hank Aaron State Trail:
-84th to 94th
-Near Underwood Creek
Lakeshore State Park
Menomonee Valley
Community Park
American Family Field

KINNICKINNICK RIVER

1st & Lincoln
Boone & Crockett
Great Lakes Facility
Harbor District Neighbors
Holler Park
Jackson Park
Jackson Parkway
Kinnickinnic River Trail
Lyons Park
Pulaski Park

MILWAUKEE RIVER

Caesar's Park
Capitol Bridge
Estabrook Park
Gordon Park
Havenwoods State Forest
Hubbard Park
Kern Park
Kletzsch Park
Lincoln Creek:
-Green Bay Ave
-Bishop's Creek
-N. 35th St.
-N. 51st St.
-N. 60th St.

NORTHERN WATERSHEDS

Brown Deer Rd.
Eisenbahn Trail, West Bend
Fellenz Park, West Bend
Lime Kiln Park, Grafton
Menomonee Falls
Moraine Park, West Bend
Peninsula Park, Saukville
River Hill Park, Kewaskum
Thiensville Village Park

26TH ANNUAL MILWAUKEE RIVERKEEPER SPRING CLEANUP



SATURDAY
APRIL 24, 2021

- REGISTER
- MASK UP
- WASH HANDS
- SPREAD OUT
- BE KIND
- HAVE FUN!

To view a map of sites and register for the event visit:

bit.ly/MRKCleanup26



PHOTO CONTEST

Share your favorite photos of the cleanup on social media (Think: interesting finds, teamwork, river scenes) and you could WIN a Patagonia Prize Pack!

Tag [@mkeriverkeeper](#) and use [#MRKCleanup26](#) to automatically be entered.

For additional information on Milwaukee Riverkeeper visit milwaukeeriverkeeper.org

Riverkeeper Watch



Federal Policy Updates

After a particularly divisive election, the New Year has been filled with considerable excitement and optimism on the environmental front. We signed onto several letters outlining our priority asks for the first 100 days of the Biden Administration relating to rectifying some of the most egregious environmental rollbacks from the Trump Administration. We also urged the Administration to halt several leftover last-minute rulemaking efforts, reaffirmed many of our policy and funding priorities for protecting the Great Lakes and its tributaries, as well as urged proactive government action on climate change, environmental justice, and single-use plastic pollution with Executive Orders. Collaborative efforts to push for a moratorium on water and energy utility shut offs for failure to pay during the pandemic and associated economic turmoil have been largely successful. The Biden Administration has already signed dozens of Executive Orders advancing many of these priorities including rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement, and has initiated immediate review of harmful rollbacks of standards that protect our air, water, and communities.

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee are both holding hearings in late February to ramp up federal investments in drinking water and sewage treatment infrastructure to as much as \$10 billion per program per year, or \$100 billion over the next 5 years through the existing state revolving fund programs. This is vitally important, as the Great Lakes region alone faces more than \$188 billion in needed upgrades and repairs, and leaking/broken pipes are a major source

of pollution to our waterways. There are also talks of a separate national program to invest in lead water service line replacement. Milwaukee alone needs to replace over 70,000 lead service lines at an estimated cost of \$750 million, and more federal grants could help the City redouble efforts to address this public health threat.

State Policy Updates

In mid-February, Governor Evers put out his proposed state budget, which advanced many conservation priorities including: opening an Office of Environmental Justice; advancing the Governor's Task Force on Climate Change including addressing flooding issues; ordering utilities to test drinking water for PFAS; ordering development of public health standards for dozens of PFAS chemicals, as well as, hiring more staff; providing cost-share funding for lead pipe replacement; making funds available to more families to deal with nitrate-contaminated wells; and increasing fees for CAFO/factory farm monitoring and enforcement. The budget also includes a provision where Counties and Cities could enact a 0.5% sales tax with a binding referendum, which would be welcomed by many communities struggling with unbudgeted pandemic costs on top of already difficult budgets for addressing failing water infrastructure and managing stormwater.

Alternatively, the proposed budget calls for funding the I94 highway expansion, which we and the CMRT Coalition (Communities for More Responsible Transportation) oppose. While we support reconstruction of the highway and necessary safety improvements within the existing footprint, highway expansion would exacerbate air quality and climate change concerns; and further divide our community and exacerbate environmental justice concerns. The proposed significant increase in impervious surfaces and stormwater runoff would harm the Menomonee River and several tributaries (Honey and Underwood Creeks) by increasing pollution and flood risk.

WDNR is updating two general permits that address industrial stormwater, or runoff from industrial sites into local rivers. Industrial stormwater is generally very dirty and often has many toxic pollutants associated with different uses at the sites. Stormwater permits are

meant to manage stormwater on-site and minimize the amount of pollution getting into our waterways. We partnered with Midwest Environmental Advocates, who submitted comments on our behalf, centered around strengthening monitoring requirements for permit-holders, especially in response to new TMDLs or "pollution diets" now in place in the Milwaukee River Basin, as well as requiring industrial facilities to be more prepared for intense rainfall and flooding expected due to climate change.

Local Policy Updates

Over the past few months, we partnered with several groups to submit comments to WDNR and Milwaukee County officials regarding our concerns with commercial developments along the lakefront. Specifically, Milwaukee County is reviewing a proposal to put a high-end restaurant on the top floor of the Bradford Beach Pavilion. Any lease of former lakebed lands, per the Public Trust Doctrine, needs to allow for public access and use of the facility, and should ensure that ALL members of our community can enjoy our lakefront.

Along with several other partners, we requested that WDNR complete an Environmental Impact Statement for a proposed expansion of the Orchard Ridge Landfill in Menomonee Falls, which would involve excavation of a closed Superfund Site, rerouting and enclosing a stretch of a small tributary to the Menomonee River, and filling several small wetlands, among other impacts. WDNR denied this request, and we are looking at all options to protect our rivers.

We are also advancing work to clean-up and restore the Milwaukee Estuary Area of Concern. Most of the sediment sampling work was completed in 2020 and design/engineering efforts will continue through 2021. We expect there to be a public meeting on the proposed Dredge Materials Management Facility (DMMF) in late April, which is an integral piece of the cleanup effort. Public meetings on several proposed habitat restoration projects along the lower Milwaukee River from the former North Avenue Dam through Lincoln Park will likely happen this spring/summer.

To read all letters and comments issued by Milwaukee Riverkeeper visit:
bit.ly/MRKletters



Hidden Harms

We're excited to announce that our brand new, virtual lesson, Hidden Harms: Emerging Contaminants in Our Waters, is now available!

In this lesson, students explore the chemicals in everyday products polluting our rivers. Students also hear from real scientists to learn how these contaminants cause problems for our fish and wildlife. Together, we'll find ways to keep these pollutants out of our waters. Since many students are learning online today, we made sure these concepts could be explored from home, activity-centered, and engaging.

This lesson was created in collaboration with several partners that wanted to bring attention to the chemicals in household and personal care products that ultimately end up in our river system. Emerging contaminants, or any compounds that our wastewater treatment plants do not monitor or treat for, are products like medications, recreational drugs, weedkillers that enter our waterways in ways we might not notice, through leaking pipes, our treated wastewater (things we wash down the drain) and stormwater.

We hope students will discover they have the power to take action to protect our waterways. Whether your class has done lessons with Milwaukee Riverkeeper before, or if this lesson would be the first, we hope that you will be able to use this new resource.

Contact: julius@milwaukeeriverkeeper.org to schedule a lesson today!

April Sampling Event

Interested in helping collect data and contributing to our study of these pollutants? Community Leaders Engaged in Aquatic Research (CLEAR MKE) is looking for volunteers to collect samples from our rivers three times per year.

Join our next sampling event on April 3rd.

For more information visit:
bit.ly/MRKecmonitor

Advocacy in Action:

Advocating for change in a challenging year

Even though a global pandemic wasn't in our strategic plan for the year, we adapted quickly and remained a strong voice for our rivers. We're proud of all the work we did to advocate for our waterways — and the list is long (bit.ly/MRKAdvocate2020). We owe a special thank you to our friends and partners that advocated for fishable, swimmable, drinkable waters in 2020.

At Milwaukee Riverkeeper, we work to identify sources of pollution, respond to community concerns, and work with partners to find solutions to problems affecting our rivers. This year, the pandemic forced us all outside, seeking comfort in nature and our local waterways. This increased presence on and along our rivers translated to an uptick in pollution reports: from construction site runoff, to water main breaks, to illicit discharges, to sinking boats – it's been quite a year!

When we're not responding to community concerns, we review permits for wastewater discharges, and development plans that could adversely affect our rivers. We also monitor local, regional, state, and federal policies, which impact water quality or wildlife habitat in the Milwaukee River Basin, and provide official comments to help make them better. By offering this input, we are providing a critical voice for our waters.

While it felt like the world stopped last year, it was actually incredibly busy. In 2020, we submitted over 50 formal comments, both organizationally, as well as, in partnership with other environmental groups. We expect the momentum to continue, as we grapple with new fiscal realities from addressing the pandemic and a changed political landscape.

Shifting focus to the work ahead

After a shift in White House administration and leadership, we too, are looking to shift our efforts. While all politicians make campaign promises to protect our people and our planet, it is up to all of us to hold our elected officials accountable, and see that work and resource allocation are equitable. In 2021, we're planning to advocate for:

- Ensuring the Milwaukee River Estuary Area of Concern is restored in an effective, transparent and equitable manner;
- Advocating against highway expansion of I-94 between the Zoo and Marquette Interchanges, and reconstructing the highway in its existing footprint;
- Resources and implementation of the Wisconsin PFAS Action Plan including development of water quality standards for chemicals of concern; and
- Protecting our Great Lakes from aquatic invasive species like Asian carp, and ensuring new federal ballast water rules do not exempt Great Lakes vessels.

We do our best to speak for our rivers, but we can't do it alone. We rely on our friends and fellow community members to also advocate for change. By lending your voice, you play an important role in the future health of our waterways and our communities.





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www.milwaukeeriverkeeper.org

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Milwaukee, WI
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JOIN US FOR AN EVENT!

For more information, registration and other events visit:

milwaukeeriverkeeper.org/connect/events

APR
1

WATER SAMPLING EVENT

Collect data for our ongoing emerging contaminant research in partnership with CLEAR MKE | All Day

APR
24

26TH ANNUAL SPRING CLEANUP

Help cleanup and restore our rivers at this community wide, one-day event! **Registration Required**

MAY
27

THE WORTH OF WATER FILM

Enjoy this film screening and discussion from the comfort of your couch. 5:30pm-7:30pm | Free

JUN
15

EXPLORE THE MILWAUKEE URBAN

WATER TRAIL Paddle the Milwaukee River with us, beginner friendly. 5pm | \$30

JUN
27

RAIN BARREL WORKSHOP

Decorate your own home water collection system. Includes adapter kit. 3:00pm | \$40

JUL
20

EXPLORE THE MILWAUKEE URBAN WATER TRAIL

Paddle the Menomonee River with us, beginner friendly. 5pm | \$30

SEP
12

5TH ANNUAL BOAT PARADE

Join us for this twist on a family tradition with parade floats that really FLOAT!

SEP
21

MILKY MOONLIGHT

Marvel at the moon with other river lovers during this twilight paddle.

SAVE THE DATE

