



MILWAUKEE
RIVERKEEPER®

SUMMER 2021

RIVER CURRENTS

A PUBLICATION OF MILWAUKEE RIVERKEEPER



The Problem with Plastic

Litter makes it difficult to focus on the real issue

Plastic bags tangled in trees, cigarette butts littering sidewalks, styrofoam takeout containers drifting along the river: these sights have become far too common. These items make up only a fraction of the 11 million pounds of plastic flowing into Lake Michigan each year. Over time, plastic breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces, and never disappears. Plastic pollution is more than an unsightly nuisance, it disrupts the life cycles and food chain of wildlife in our waterways, poisons our air, food, our drinking water source, and its production is contributing to climate change. With no sign of plastic manufacturing slowing, it's clear we need to break free it. Accountability is a first step before we can truly restore our waterways.

For decades, the plastics industry has intentionally framed the plastic problem as an issue with individual-level choices. By supporting cleanup and recycling programs, the industry has effectively forced the responsibility for their plastic problem onto the shoulders of consumers. Cleanups, while important, only address a small fraction of plastic pollution and are neverending. Recycling, while also important, is an imperfect solution with only about 8% of plastic being recycled. Moreover, when it comes to avoiding single-use plastic as individuals, many of us hit roadblocks with alternatives often being too expensive, inconvenient, or unavailable.

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Message from the Executive Director



Dear Friend of the Waters,

Hope is on the horizon. Our lives are returning to normal, the economy is growing, and our communities are reawakening. Last year, when the world as we knew it shut down, life became electronic, flat, and two-dimensional. We lost the gift of connecting and gathering, but we took refuge in our natural spaces and found solace in the outdoors.

This past Earth Week, during the 26th Annual Milwaukee Riverkeeper Spring Cleanup, **over 3,000 community volunteers** removed over **110,000 pounds of trash** from **95 different locations** throughout our precious watersheds. No doubt, it was a huge success, but we also know there is much more and the stream of pollution—mostly single-use plastic—is, unfortunately, never-ending. This year, in particular, many of our volunteers felt overwhelmed

by the amount of trash they found. We have more cleanups planned through our popular Adopt-a-River Program, but that is not enough. The nuisance trash pollution keeps flowing from the land down into our waterways, causing harm.

Did you know that **more than 22 million pounds of plastic pollution** flow into our Great Lakes every year? Once there, it never really goes away. It continues to break down into microplastics and then we find it in birds, fish, and even our drinking water. The truth is, plastic production isn't slowing, in fact, it's expected to **increase by nearly 50% over the next 10 years**.

Milwaukee Riverkeeper, and many other partners are doubling down on efforts to curb single-use plastics in our local communities. Together, we've formed the Plastic Free MKE coalition, where volunteers work with individuals, businesses, and municipalities to help curb this harmful single-use plastic epidemic.

With **over 400 miles of impaired waterways** in the Milwaukee River Basin, plastic isn't the only issue we're focused on, overall water quality remains a top priority. Our volunteers sampled throughout the pandemic and this fall we'll publish our 10th annual Report Card on river health. Illegal dumping and illicit discharges still happen in the

Milwaukee River Basin and we are collecting data and confronting offenders to protect our drinking water source and stop pollution from entering our waterways.

Just as there is much to be hopeful for, there is much work to do to achieve our vision of swimmable, fishable, drinkable waterways for all. Make a tax-deductible gift today. Sign up to be a volunteer or to attend an event and learn more about how you can help make our world a better place.

To healthy communities and free flowing rivers,

Jennifer Bolger Breceda

Executive Director

P.S. We're recruiting for new board members. If you're ready to make a difference learn more at the link below!



JOIN OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS
www.milwaukeekeeper.org/board

WE'RE RECRUITING!

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Brian Spahn President	Catherine Mercuri Treasurer	Michael Bork Joseph Cincotta	Christian Keen William Morley	Peter Thornquist Matt Wolter
Juan Alsace Vice President	Patti McNair Secretary	Beth Handle		

continued from cover -- To take on plastic pollution at the scale necessary to create long-term, sustainable change, we must address the elephant in the room: production.

What can be done if recycling and cleanups aren't the answer? The solution lies upstream. Upstream solutions address problems at their source. In the case of plastic pollution, that means working collaboratively to stop plastic production and use in the first place, rather than focusing solely on cleanups, recycling, and consumer choices. That's why Milwaukee Riverkeeper is part of a county-wide movement called Plastic-Free MKE to prevent the toxic flow of single-use plastics into our communities and waterways.

The Plastic-Free MKE Coalition is a collective of nonprofit organizations, government agencies, businesses, and passionate volunteers. The Coalition operates several topic-based working groups including policy, education,



"Lake Friendly" (low-plastic) businesses, reusable systems, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. These groups drive our movement and work in harmony with public education initiatives, such as our monthly webinars.

Local Milwaukee businesses have been an important part of our movement. Outpost Natural Foods and the City of Milwaukee

Environmental Collaboration Office are leading efforts to start a reusable take out container service. Another local business, Outwoken Tea, prioritizes sustainability through biodegradable and non-plastic packaging, and has provided valuable insight into supporting other small businesses in becoming low-plastic. The Glass Pantry, a new local retailer, offers package free alternatives to kitchen and household products. As more businesses in Milwaukee take steps to reduce single-use plastic they are normalizing sustainable practices and demonstrating that plastic-free is good for business, too!

In addition to supporting sustainable business initiatives, Plastic-Free MKE works with local municipalities to push for policy change. For example, the City of Milwaukee passed Only Upon Request straw legislation, encouraging businesses to drastically decrease plastic straw usage. Meanwhile Milwaukee County plans to phase out single-use plastics and eliminate polystyrene foam from county-owned facilities and parks by next year. Plastic-Free MKE representatives have also been heavily involved in the City-County Task Force on Climate and Economic Equity. The task force is creating a Climate and Economic Equity Plan, with the goal of reducing community-wide greenhouse gas emissions and addressing racial and economic inequity.

Although our coalition has grown, volunteers remain at the heart of our work. If you would like to get involved with Plastic-Free MKE, visit: plasticfreemke.org or follow us on Facebook or Instagram @plasticfreemke.



WATER BOTTLE REFILL STATIONS
Volunteers gear up for a day of water refills



ATTACK OF THE PLASTIC BAGS
This monster is made of 500 bags, the average an American uses each year.



JOIN THE REUSE REVOLUTION!
Volunteers are at the heart of the movement

STAFF

Jennifer Bolger Breceda, J.D. Executive Director	Leah Holloway Program Manager	Cesar Castillo, <i>Public Ally</i> Water & Outreach Program Assistant	Anna Ostermeier* Sustainability Coordinator
Cheryl Nenn, M.S. Riverkeeper	Lisa Greco Operations Manager	Rebecca Biggs* Water Quality Assistant	*Marshfield Clinic Americorps
Anne Michalski Communications Manager	Katie Rademacher Water Quality Manager	Allie Mendez* Cleanup & Events Coordinator	

THANKS & HIGHLIGHTS

26th Annual Spring Cleanup

Together again, communities unite to tackle pollution and restore our rivers

After a long year apart, the 26th Annual Milwaukee Riverkeeper Spring Cleanup united us once again with a common goal: healthy rivers and communities.

Excitement spread through the crowds, as volunteers prepared for a day of trash removal. More than 3,000 community members gathered at 95 sites across 4 counties in the Milwaukee River Basin to restore our rivers. Together, we removed over 110,000 pounds of trash.

We are once again grateful for our partners and sponsors. Without the generous support and collaboration of our friends, this work would

simply not be possible. This year, 25 businesses, organizations and agencies generously committed to lend their support to achieving a swimmable, drinkable fishable future for our shared waters.

THANK YOU SPONSORS:

- American Transmission Company
- Boldt
- Current Electric
- Department of Public Works
- Fund for Lake Michigan
- Gilbane Building Company
- Great Lakes Cleanup
- InterFluve
- Jacobs
- Keep Greater Milwaukee Beautiful
- Meijer
- Milwaukee County Parks
- Milwaukee Kayak Company
- Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District
- Ocean Conservancy
- Patagonia
- raSmith
- S.C. Johnson
- Sid Grinker
- Symbiont
- Twisted Path Distillery
- Visual Impressions
- WE Energies
- Whole Foods

Volunteers masked up and spread out to keep our communities safe.



THE PROBLEM WITH PLASTIC

When we work together, we accomplish so much. While we celebrate the success of this event, we are reminded that there is much work to be done if we want to achieve a drinkable, swimmable, fishable future for the Milwaukee River Basin.

Our most frequent finds during the Spring Cleanup were all single-use plastics. We know this is causing harm to our communities and our waterways. 85% of the fish in the Milwaukee River have plastic in their intestinal tract. If we truly want a fishable future for our rivers, we must find a solution.

Together with our partners in the Plastic-Free MKE coalition we are working to help curb single use plastics in our local community. To learn more visit: plasticfreemke.org

It takes a lot of work to make long-term change. Much like the health of our bodies, the health of our rivers is the

sum of decades of choices.

Together, we must restore accountability and keep pushing for the future we wish to see for our waterways.

ADOPT-A-RIVER

While we were able to remove a record amount of trash this year, we know there is much more out there. Interested in helping restore our rivers year round? Be on the lookout for Adopt-A-River cleanups this summer. Or consider adopting your own section of the river.

But wait -- before you head out, download the Clean Swell app on your phone. This app allows you to report trash data to Milwaukee Riverkeeper. It's easy to use and your data helps us determine trash trends in our area, so we can find new ways to address pollution and make an even bigger impact.

FREQUENT FINDS:

There's one thing these items have in common, and it isn't reusable: plastic.



For more information about Milwaukee Riverkeeper or to make a donation visit: www.milwaukeekeeper.org



Riverkeeper Watch



State Policy Updates

Milwaukee Riverkeeper and our friends at the Coalition for More Responsible Transportation (CMRT) oppose the proposed expansion of I94 from 70th to 16th Streets. The proposal would increase polluted stormwater runoff to the Menomonee River and several creeks to the west, as well as create a higher likelihood of sewage overflows during severe rain events further polluting the rivers. We support repairing the highway in its existing footprint, including construction of necessary safety improvements. The current proposal is estimated at \$1 billion and was over-turned by Governor Walker. It is contrary to Governor Evers' Climate Action Plan, and poorly timed due to a decrease in traffic from changing workplace trends.

A supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will be conducted and added to the EIS completed over 5 years ago. This allows additional public input and updated rainfall and flood projections to be incorporated, and provides opportunity to address environmental justice issues. We will inform you of ways to get involved, and opportunities to advocate for transit/local road repair in the state budget, which helps protect our rivers.

The Natural Resources Board voted to begin the rule-making process for setting state standards for toxic PFAS or "forever chemicals" in our ground water, drinking water, and surface waters. These standards are important for protecting our rivers and communities. PFAS contamination is linked to many diseases and human health threats including cancer,

liver damage, and learning impairments, among others. There are dozens of sites contaminated with PFAS in Wisconsin, and WDNR has found contamination in nearly every water and fish sample taken from the Milwaukee Estuary Area of Concern. There is documented contamination of the Kinnickinnic River from firefighting foams used at Mitchell Airport and adjacent National Guard/Federal facilities. Currently, there are no federal standards, so Wisconsin needs to step up to protect its people and the water we depend on. There is significant industry opposition to these rules.

A new State bill was recently introduced and referred to committee—that would make changes to existing programs, create new programs and water standards, provide funding, and create new positions to address PFAS. Milwaukee Riverkeeper and our partners around the state provided comments on the draft legislation to make it stronger and are hoping it will be supported and strengthened as it makes its way through the State Legislature. Reach out to your State Representatives to support this bill, and find out more here: <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/proposals/sb361>

Local Policy Updates

Waste Management is proposing a significant expansion of the Orchard Ridge Eastern Landfill in Menomonee Falls, already the largest solid waste landfill in Wisconsin, by 76.6 acres. The proposed landfill expansion would include a 17-acre vertical expansion over part of the site and accept 750,000 tons of waste per year. This project would fill several wetlands, bury a portion of a creek and reroute a creek that drains to the Menomonee River. From potential odors, to water quality concerns, to increased traffic, many residents are rightfully concerned.

To expand the site, 58 acres of the existing Boundary Road Landfill (near 124th St. and Brown Deer Rd.)—the size of about 50 football fields—would be excavated, containing 1.3 million cubic yards of toxic waste, including over 10 million gallons of liquid hazardous waste. Predating many environmental laws, it contains toxic compounds in an unlined landfill, including DDT, PCBs and heavy metals. The site operated from 1954-1971, and was

designated a Superfund Site in 1984. The current dump has a cap on top to keep out rain, a wall to contain wastes, a pump for groundwater and a system to send contaminated liquid to MMSD. Without a liner, it is likely polluting groundwater and adjacent creeks that drain to the Menomonee River.

Waste Management plans to move the Superfund waste to areas in the landfill that are new and have liners, which could be positive. However, concern over how this hazardous waste will be properly tested, managed, and disposed to protect our waterways, adjacent neighborhoods, and downstream wells is unknown. Adding to concerns, last summer, Waste Management was fined \$232,000 for distributing toxic waste throughout the Franklin Landfill. Details about these concerns will be included in a future plan of operation, which will not be publicly accessible. The public deserves to know these details now with definitive plans for protection of public health and the environment.

The new landfill is being designed to put waste below the groundwater level again, which is unacceptable. There is potential for untreated leachate, or contaminated liquid, to continue to contaminate groundwater and runoff, which could further impact the Menomonee River.

Milwaukee Riverkeeper, partners and neighbors called for a full Environmental Impact Statement, but it seems unlikely the DNR will comply. We also testified at the May public hearing and shared comments on how to make the project more protective of our waters and community.

Public comment is open on the Army Corps of Engineers' Feasibility Report and Environmental Assessment on the concrete channel removal and restoration of 6,700 linear feet of Honey Creek between Bluemound Road and the confluence with the Menomonee River, including restoration of riparian lands. Milwaukee Riverkeeper supports this project but will be sending comments to help improve several design elements and public access to the Creek.

Learn more(see *Honey Creek under draft studies section*): <https://www.lre.usace.army.mil/Missions/Planning/Planning-and-Studies/>

Comments can be sent until June 28th to: HoneyCreek@usace.army.mil

Invasive and Offensive

A quiet, but critical change is happening in the world of fish and wildlife. "Asian Carp," or four species of carp native to Asia and invasive to the U.S. - bighead carp, silver carp, black carp and grass carp - will now be called "Invasive Carp." As with most scientific terminology, the term "Asian Carp" was intended to refer to the name of the place of origin. While the intention was simple, sometimes the unconscious impact carries more harm than good. The way we choose names often places stigma on the places and people where the wildlife or plants come from, failing to acknowledge cultural and ecological value of the species in these places. While changing the term is important, it's impossible to achieve real, long-lasting change without first recognizing why it's harmful.

First imported into the United States in the 1960s and 1970s for use in southern aquaculture facilities and retention ponds, these fish escaped during flooding and damaged the fisheries of the Mississippi River. Studies predict that Invasive Carp could thrive in Lake Michigan. If they become established, they could quickly spread to connected lakes and rivers. These carp are known for their appetites, and could threaten the food supply for native fish.

By grouping these fish under the term "Asian," and continually sharing the impending threat they pose to our freshwater ecosystems, we are adding to anti-Asian sentiments in the U.S. Although it may seem like a minor change, using these terms creates distance through difference, instead of unity through commonalities. Growing instances of violence towards the AAPI community in the U.S. in the wake of COVID-19 mean we can no longer be complicit.

The past year has made it easier to see just how much we all have in common, and the ways we are failing each other. Together, we must examine the important intersections of the issues facing our world including our scientific philosophies and practices.

As an environmental community, we care deeply about protecting our waters and our wildlife, but we spend much less time talking about how our scientific pursuits can actually exacerbate inequity. We must also be accountable to each other, after all, we ARE the environment too.

If you'd like to learn more about the AAPI community in Wisconsin visit:

www.hawamke.org

Advocacy in Action: Getting contamination out of the Milwaukee Estuary

Milwaukee's industrial past contaminated much of the sediment resting at the bottom of our waterways. These pollutants make their way into insects, fish and other wildlife. The Federal Area of Concern program is going to cleanup this contamination and restore our Great Lakes waters. Dredging contaminated sediment, restores our waterways and increases protection for people and wildlife.

To dispose of the dredged material, Milwaukee plans to construct a Dredged Material Management Facility (DMMF) to hold the 1.9 million cubic yards of mostly dirt, some with bound pollutants, from the bottom of river. The location of the DMMF would be next to an existing facility that is close to capacity.

To get to this point, three options were considered. The first was to do nothing, which does not protect public. The second option was landfill disposal, at more than double the cost. This option has a significant carbon footprint, and is more disruptive to the community. It's likely this sediment would have gone to the Orchard Ridge landfill (see Riverkeeper Watch), which is being expanded for the second time in 2 years, and is directly impacting several streams that drain to the Menomonee River. Further, contaminated liquid from that landfill is sent to MMSD and then discharged back to Lake Michigan.

The DMMF is the most cost-effective option, as its easier to ship sediment via barge after mechanical dredging (where dirt is scooped with an excavator), or transfer it via pipe after hydraulic dredging (where dirt is sucked up into a vacuum hose) to this lakefront facility. Hydraulic dredging could transport sediment in pipes under the water line or floating along the side of the river to minimize disruptions for boaters and views. Because its much cheaper to build the DMMF, it allows for the maximum amount of contaminated sediment to be removed and sets the stage for restoration projects to help achieve our vision of clean, fishable and swimmable rivers in the Milwaukee River Basin.

The DMMF would be constructed by filling in a part of the lake, a public trust resource. As such, it is important that the site be used for public benefit. Removal of contaminated sediment from the rivers is a public benefit, but the question of future land use remains. Will it be used for Port operations, or turned into a park, or some combination of uses? Given the high profile of this particular lakefront site and its importance for a variety of migratory birds and ducks, it is appropriate to ensure that as much of the site as possible is dedicated to public use after filling operations are complete (20+ years). Committing now to include the public's vision for the final use rather than punting this decision to future generations is essential to ensuring a public benefit.

In May, a public informational meeting and a public hearing to allow for the construction the DMMF were held. Milwaukee Riverkeeper testified at the hearing, and will be closely following the subsequent permitting for this facility, and will share opportunities for public comment and engagement.





Collaborative Office Space:
600 E. Greenfield Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53204

www.milwaukeekeeper.org

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JOIN US FOR AN EVENT!

For more information, registration and other events visit:
milwaukeekeeper.org/connect/events

JUN
23

HIDDEN HARMS IN OUR WATERWAYS

Learn about ongoing emerging contaminant research
in partnership with CLEAR MKE | **Free**

JUN
27

RAIN BARREL WORKSHOP

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

JULY
21

EXPLORE THE MILWAUKEE URBAN WATER TRAIL

Paddle the Menomonee River with us,
beginner friendly. **5:00pm | \$30**

AUG
17

EXPLORE THE MILWAUKEE URBAN WATER TRAIL

Paddle the Menomonee River with us,
beginner friendly. **5:00pm | \$30**

SEPT
21

MOONLIGHT PADDLE

Marvel at the moon with other river lovers during this
twilight paddle. **5:00pm | \$30**

OCT
16

FISHING THE MILWAUKEE RIVER GREENWAY

Fish with the pros! Learn the
best tips and tricks to up your fly fishing game.
9:30am | \$35

SAVE THE DATE

SEP
19

5TH ANNUAL BOAT PARADE

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

NOV
4

A FLOWING TRADITION: ANNUAL GATHERING

Join in an evening of fun - featuring keynote
speaker, Seth Seigel!

