



Mississippi River Watershed Partnership Workshop

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
JUNE 25-27, 2024

**SUMMARY REPORT OF WORKSHOP
PROCEEDINGS AND ACTIONS**



A Collaboration Kickoff

Produced by America's Watershed Initiative
and The Nature Conservancy

Planning Committee



Consulting Partners



What Brought Us Together:

Laying the Foundation for Collaboration

The Mississippi River Watershed, one of our nation’s most important resources, faces unique and shared challenges. Flowing across 1.245 million square miles in 31 U.S. states and two Canadian provinces, the Mississippi River and its tributaries provide drinking water to countless communities, nourish crops, transport goods, sustain robust fisheries and wildlife habitat, offer recreational opportunities, and provide food, jobs and economic security to millions of Americans. The lands and waters of the Mississippi River Watershed are vital to our nation’s well-being. Unfortunately, the Watershed faces a number of threats that impact communities, agriculture, transportation, and the environment, including poor water quality, the impacts of flood and drought, aging infrastructure, degraded and disconnected habitat, and inequitable access to recreational opportunities.

Over the past two years, America’s Watershed Initiative (AWI), in partnership with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), engaged dozens of federal, regional, state, community, industry, and NGO leaders to explore ways to address these challenges at scale. Emerging from those discussions, a goal took shape to build a diverse and robust partnership across different sectors to develop shared priorities across the entire Watershed. Building upon existing initiatives, this partnership would act as one voice to generate broad support and dedicated funding to drive integrated on-the-ground action to improve the health of the Watershed for the human and natural communities that depend on it.

From these discussions, there was clear interest in the idea of a partnership. The Mississippi River Watershed Partnership Workshop was held in St. Louis, Missouri on June 25-27, 2024. Designed with input from the Upper Mississippi River Association, the Ohio River Basin Association, the Red River Valley Association, the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee, and other consulting partners¹, the goal was to provide a venue to share work being done in each Basin and to explore how a partnership could add value to an already robust body of work within the Mississippi River Watershed.²

Given the complexity and diversity of issues in the Watershed, bringing people together created an opportunity to develop a common understanding and shared language around previously identified key issues: water quality, floods and droughts, inland navigation, fish and wildlife and recreation and gave space to understand the leadership challenges in the Watershed.

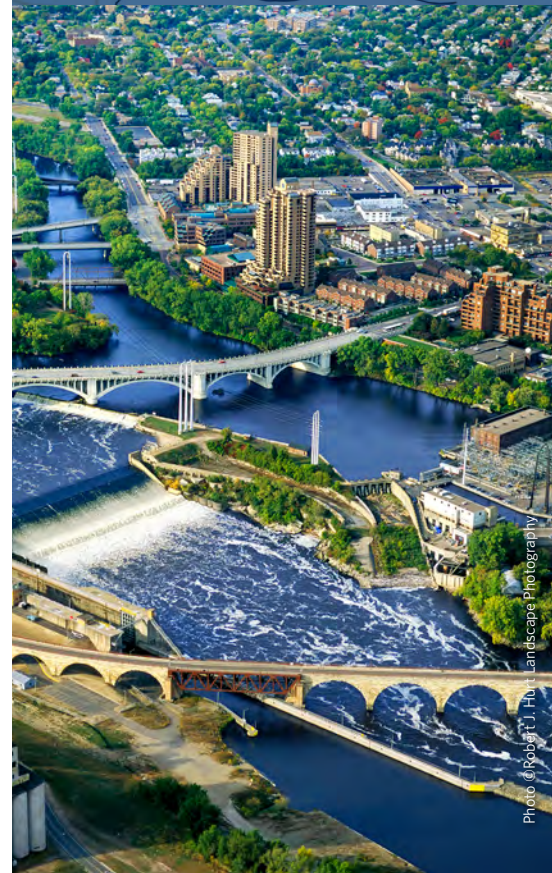
¹ Consulting partners include: Caterpillar Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund, Mississippi Interstate Cooperative Resource Association, National Audubon Society, National Corn Growers Association, National Wildlife Federation, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee and the Walton Family Foundation.

² In this report, Watershed refers to the entirety of the Mississippi River Watershed, including the mainstem, major tributaries, and connected geographies. Basin refers to geographies within the Mississippi River Watershed such as the upper and lower Mississippi, Ohio, Red, and the Missouri Rivers.

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When you face an intractable problem—enlarge it—within this expansion there will be zones of agreement.”

General Peter “Duke” DeLuca,
from Dwight Eisenhower



Workshop Highlights

The event brought together over 100 leaders and scientists from 21 states and the District of Columbia representing 8 federal agencies, 13 state agencies, 27 non-governmental organizations, 7 corporations, and 5 academic institutions. This highly engaged group of professionals brought their extensive experience and diverse perspectives on Mississippi River Watershed challenges and the work being done from the local to the national level.

The design and objectives of the workshop were to create a forum which produced:

- 1.** New and strengthened relationships among leaders across the Mississippi River Watershed and its major basins.
- 2.** Recognition of the value of a Mississippi River Watershed Partnership.
- 3.** Opportunities for positive change that such a Partnership makes possible.
- 4.** Valuable information about watershed management, collaboration, and leadership.
- 5.** Next steps to promote individual and collective goals in the MS River Watershed and its major basins.
- 6.** A summary report of the workshop proceedings.



Speakers for the workshop included:

Opening Remarks:

- **Kim Lutz**, Executive Director *America's Watershed Initiative*
 - **Michael Reuter**, Director, Midwest Division, *The Nature Conservancy*
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Keynote Speakers:

- **General Peter "Duke" DeLuca**, Brigadier General, *U.S. Army (Retired)*, President, *ACULED Global Consulting*, and Adjunct Research Staff Member, *Institute for Defense Analyses*
 - **The Honorable Phil Stang**, Mayor of Kimmswick, Missouri
 - **Mr. Jaime A. Pinkham**, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, *Army for Civil Works*
 - **Mr. Robert A. Bonnie**, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation, *U.S. Department of Agriculture*
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Basin Leaders:

- **Craig Butler**, Chair, *Ohio River Basin Alliance (delivered by Harry Stone)*
- **Kirsten Wallace**, Executive Director, *Upper Mississippi River Basin Association*
- **Angeline Rodgers**, Coordinator, *Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee*
- **Richard Vaughn**, Coordinator, *Missouri River & Upper Mississippi Basins*
- **Emily Mott**, Executive Director, *Red River Valley Association*

After hearing from leaders listed above, the majority of the workshop was devoted to small group activities and discussions specifically designed to facilitate the sharing of information and to prompt thinking about issues at increasing scales of impact.



The three overarching topics for tabletop discussion were:

- 1 Leadership Issues Facing Watershed/Basin Organizations
- 2 Goals, Actions, Gaps at the Mississippi River Watershed Level
- 3 Options for Moving a Mississippi River Watershed Partnership Forward

In addition to the discussion, participants were asked to post their responses to workbook questions on designated charts displayed around the room. Following the workshop, staff from AWI and TNC recorded every individual response to these workbook questions into an Excel spreadsheet.³ We then reviewed all responses to a given question and from these, we identified common themes from related ideas and recommendations. The following sections of this report will share those key themes and the next steps for this vital work to create a Mississippi River Watershed Partnership.

What We Heard

Overall, the time spent together affirmed our assumptions that there is an overarching consensus that greater collaboration across the Mississippi River Watershed, if designed effectively, could help us achieve our goals for the Watershed in a more comprehensive and efficient way.

Additionally, we heard a desire for action.

The conversations and the ideas shared during the Workshop are not new ideas, but it has been hard for anyone to take the ideas and navigate the right course of action for implementation.



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1 Takeaways:

Basin Leadership

The purpose of the Basin leadership panel was to build a common understanding and language about work being done in the five major basins. The Basin leaders who presented introduced their organizations and described how each is structured. They gave insights about what is going well within their individual Basins around water quality, flood and drought resilience, the navigation system, fish and wildlife resources, and recreation. In addition, they shared some of the challenges affecting their work in these areas and what change(s) in their Basin would improve their ability to accomplish their goals.

Participants identified the following themes: the importance of collaboration, funding, differences in organizational structures, as well as unique and common challenges faced by the different Basin groups in managing their respective Basin issues.

1. While they have similar needs and, in some cases, similar goals, there are also different levels of focus, objectives, and work around water quality, flood and drought resilience, the navigation system, fish and wildlife resources, and recreation.
2. Organizational and governance structures, government mandates, and level of funding/investment vary widely across the basins and correlate to the level of impact.
3. The power of collaboration was a strong and consistent theme in every basin. Engaging diverse organizations and disciplines to partner with a specific purpose is critical to success. All of the basin groups have well-established networks, although collaboration works differently given varying organizational structures, funding, and stage of development of the five basin groups.
4. There is limited coordination of work, information sharing, or collaboration (i.e., coordination of efforts or goal setting) among the five basin groups.
5. Planning is being done in every basin, but at different scales.

Participants also shared their own perspectives about top leadership challenges they face, initiatives they or their organizations are taking to address those challenges, and perceived organizational biases that might be barriers to seeing important issues or including important voices in their watersheds. The following themes emerged:

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We all have a story to tell and a whole host of issues to tackle—some unique, some similar—across the basin.”



Challenges:

1. Lack of capacity (i.e., time, funding, staffing, institutional knowledge).
 2. Complexity of setting shared vision and goals among partners and engaging diverse groups which have different, and in some cases competing, priorities, goals, and agendas.
 3. Alignment and buy-in around 'the big picture' in large geographies where interests and needs are different.
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Initiatives to address these challenges:

- Focused, purposeful outreach and transparent communication with partners and the public to help create a common understanding of issues and promote deeper collaboration around shared goals. Developing relationships at multiple levels (i.e., government, NGO, and industry partners).
 - Collaborating with partners to advance existing efforts.
 - Strategic planning efforts or updates to existing plans to reflect current and shared priorities, goals, and objectives.
 - Building capacity, particularly staffing, through a variety of means.
 - Advocacy for funding.
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Organizational biases:

1. Assumptions about risk that limit broader action is driven by several factors, including a strong mission focus and 'myopic' actions (i.e., short sighted solutions versus longer view) and viewing or assuming other groups are for or against one's interests; not including those with different missions
2. Funding and programmatic constraints, such as limitations of existing programs or historical structure of organization, which may limit focus and broader collaboration.
3. Disciplinary silos or silo-mentality may lead to ignoring or disregarding other interests
4. Credential and expertise bias, such as regulatory agency constraints or non-advocacy stance
5. Assumption that 'we' collaborate well but are actually missing important constituencies (e.g., underserved communities or diverse partners)
6. Funding and resource allocation (e.g., funding limits focus, risk assumptions)

2 Takeaways:

Goals, Actions, and Gaps at the Mississippi River Watershed Level

Through our conversations with the planning and consulting partners for the meeting, we identified five key issue areas we wanted the group to discuss and consider when identifying goals and actions for the Watershed. The key issues were defined as:

- **Water Quality**
- **Flood and Drought Resilience**
- **The Navigation System**
- **Fish and Wildlife Resources**
- **Recreation**

Participants were asked to identify two meaningful goals around each key issue and to share two meaningful actions that could be taken to make a positive impact on each issue. There emerged a rich set of recommendations, ranging from broad goal statements to specific actions at various levels. The following themes emerged from what participants shared:

Water Quality

Goals:

1. Measurable reduction of pollutants such as nitrate and phosphorus entering waterways.
2. Improved water quality monitoring capacity.
3. Implementation of a common set of water quality standards, such as the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force water quality standard.
4. Measurable reduction in the Gulf hypoxic zone.
5. Watershed-wide water management plan based on better understanding of water quality issues and impacts, particularly between the upper and lower Mississippi River.

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Shared goals across issue areas provide a path to collaboration and more holistic, decentralized execution.”



Actions to achieve these goals:

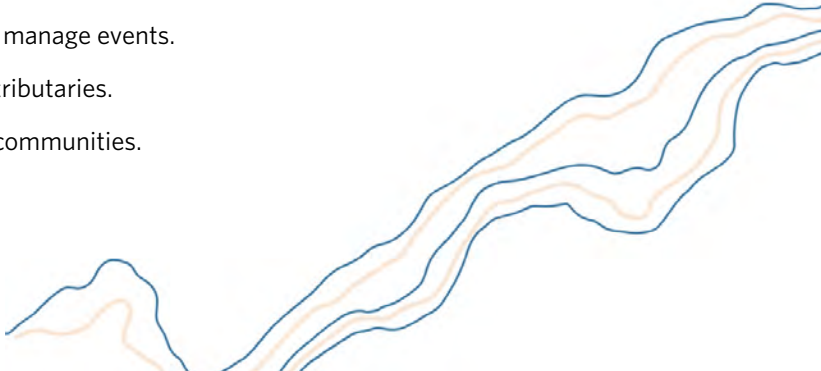
- Implementation of nutrient reduction strategies, including agriculture runoff and wastewater.
- Increased investment in monitoring systems and data collection.
- Promotion of better conservation practices (e.g., with farmers, restoration of floodplain connectivity).
- Expand outreach to partners to agree on standards and ways to adapt practices to improve water quality.

Flood/Drought Resilience

The following goals emerged for both flood and drought control and resilience:

1. Measurable increase in upstream water holding capacity along the Mississippi River and major tributaries and managed water release plans.
2. Shared understanding, and better information, about climate change scenarios, and existing flood/drought resilience actions and plans in the Basins.
3. Comprehensive flood and drought resilience and management plan implemented across the watershed. Improve collaboration between upper and lower basins around climate impacts and actions to mitigate those impacts.
4. Measurable reduction of loss to lives and property.
5. In the lower Mississippi, established levee setbacks, repair levees, maintain levee heights.
6. Promote nature based solutions to increase water storage and mitigate flood and drought impacts through floodplain and wetland restoration.
7. Incentivize communities, farmers to change land use practices.

To a large extent, many actions proposed were the same as the goals. Additional actions include:

- Improve federal emergency funding and planning for flood/drought resilience across the watershed.
 - Increase number and acreage of floodways along tributaries and the mainstem Mississippi River.
 - Develop metrics for nature based solutions at scale.
 - Model flood and drought scenarios to better plan and manage events.
 - Restore and protect riparian areas, and habitat along tributaries.
 - Equitable flood management and resilience plans for communities.
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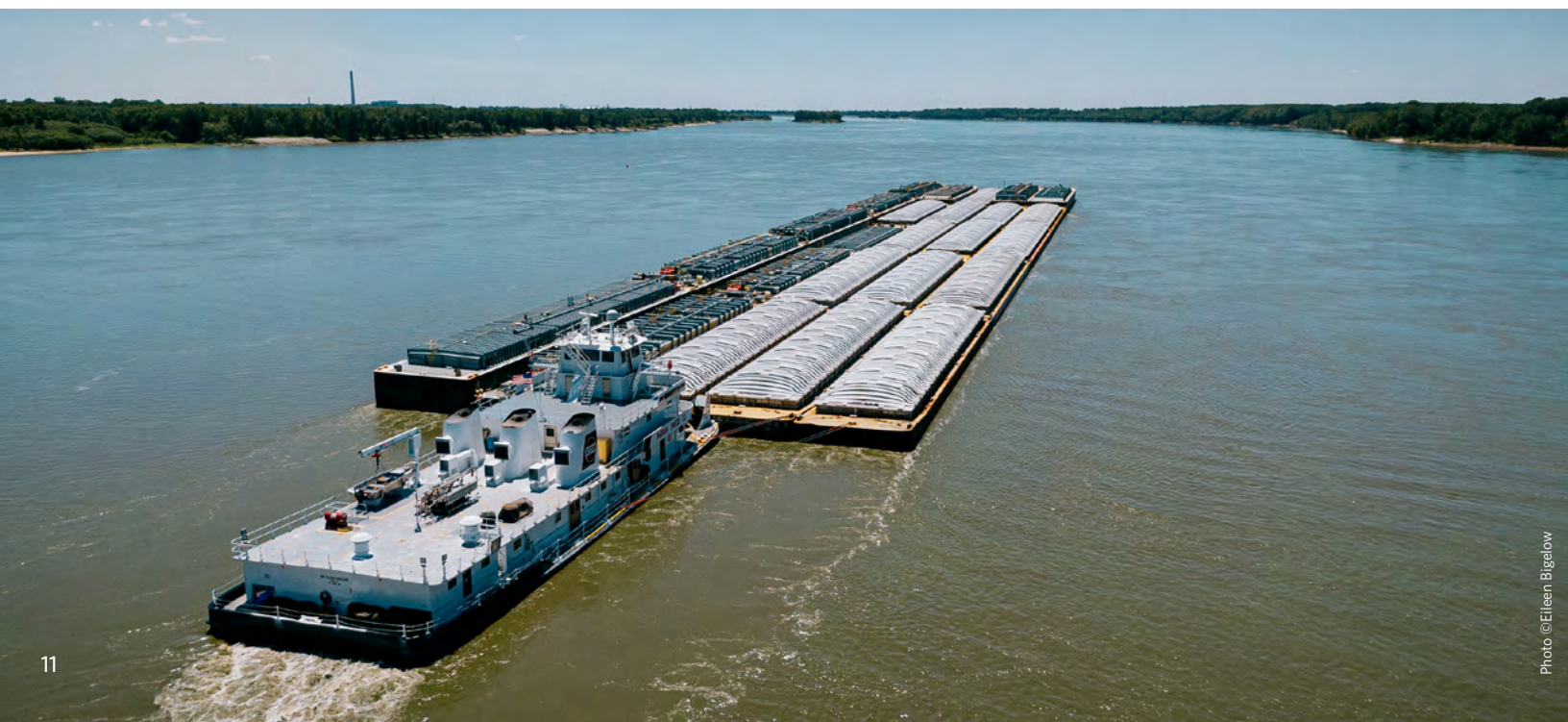
The Navigation System

Goals:

1. Modernized infrastructure that results in a measurable reduction in transportation delays or collisions at choke points (e.g., locks, dams, bridges) and increase in commerce.
 2. Measure and manage water quantity levels to support the flow of transportation and ecosystem health.
 3. Assess and manage dredging and dredged material disposal to minimize commerce interruption, reduce carbon footprint, and improve resilience against flood and drought.
 4. Evaluate navigation priorities and operations to improve efficiency and reduce negative impacts to the river.
 5. Include navigation in broader conservation planning.
-

Actions to achieve these goals:

- Assess Watershed management plans relative to reducing navigation disruptions and improving navigational safety.
- Fund air gap sensors and the Sentinel Monitoring System.
- Modernize and maintain existing infrastructure, identify beneficial uses of dredge material, and update dredging facilities.
- Manage flows and water levels sustainably, reduce sedimentation, and use network structures for better water management.
- Actively engage the navigation industry in managing and making decision about the port system and in improvements to the navigation system that benefit both commerce and the health of the Watershed.



Fish and Wildlife Resources

Goals:

1. Focus on restoring critical/priority habitats and ensuring connectivity throughout tributaries and Basins, resulting in a measurable net gain of wetlands and protection of key fish and wildlife species, and improving the quantity and quality of habitat types.
 2. Protect native species and improve biodiversity (*i.e., delist relevant endangered species, control invasive species*).
 3. Establish the Mississippi River Fish Commission.
 4. Promote Watershed-wide strategies and sustainable practices for conserving fish and wildlife resources.
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Actions to achieve these goals:

- Implement specific habitat, floodplain, wetlands restoration projects and conservation actions that increase species and habitat resilience at a watershed-wide level. Open and restore floodplains and connectivity.
- Assess impacts of climate impacts on species and habitat and develop adaptation plans. Identify and communicate conservation and economic benefits for restoration at scale.
- Secure federal funding and other resources for Watershed plans, restoration, and conservation efforts.
- Create standard operating procedures, coordinating with various organizations, and establishing marketplaces for ecosystem services.

Recreation

Goals:

1. The Mississippi River and its tributaries are seen as recreation destinations.
 2. A measurable increase in recreation access points along the Watershed's rivers.
 3. A measurable increase in recreational use along the Mississippi River and tributaries.
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Actions to achieve these goals:

- Increase public awareness of and access to recreational areas and opportunities through marketing and outreach campaigns.
- Secure funding for recreational projects and increase community input in recreation planning. Promote community based projects.
- Utilize flood and drought resilience and fish and wildlife resource restoration actions to improve recreational areas.

Equity and Inclusion

Although equity was not a thematic issue that we asked participants to discuss, it arose throughout the insights and ideas shared and should be included in this report.

Goals:

1. There is equitable access to environmental benefits, diversity and inclusion are present in environmental initiatives, and the conservation community is addressing environmental justice issues.
 2. A measurable increase in community engagement, ensuring diverse representation in decision-making, ensure space for missing voices (i.e., tribes, corporations) in the room, and promote equitable distribution of resources.
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Actions to achieve these goals:

- Implement community outreach programs (in particular underserved communities), create equitable and inclusive community funding opportunities, and promote inclusive practices in environmental management.

Organizational Structure & Capabilities

Participants were asked to share what organizational structures or capabilities are missing to achieve meaningful impact in the key thematic issue area.

- Basinwide collaboration among groups and an organizing facilitative group to set shared priorities, goals, and actions.
- Federal- and state-level coordination in some places.
- Consistent authority across Basin groups.
- Sharing stories and information about challenges, initiatives, and successes. Common repository of data to share expertise.
- Adequate federal funding for Watershed organizations and initiatives.



3 Takeaways:

Moving a Mississippi River Watershed Partnership Forward

A clear takeaway from the workshop is that there is interest in collaborative action for broader, larger scale impact. The challenges that people see, such as the sheer complexity of achieving tangible outcomes and alignment across a geographically expansive and complex region, are real and will need to be addressed.

Clear themes and a high degree of correlation emerged around both the pros and cons of moving a Mississippi River Watershed Partnership forward, recommended action steps for key issue areas (water quality, flood and drought resilience, navigation system, fish and wildlife resources, and recreation), motivations and barriers to engagement, and additional thoughts and ideas about what a partnership should be.

Pros:

“Collaborative action for bigger impact.”

1. Collaborative action for bigger impact: there were multiple mentions about the benefit of Watershed-wide collaboration and planning resulting in more significant impact at a larger scale.
2. Optimization of resources, funding, and expertise were frequently noted as key advantages.
3. Similarly, improved and more regular communication and coordination were seen as a major benefit, both to work and teams within Basins and to aligning efforts across Basins. Related to this was a perceived boost in coordinating projects, securing funding, and effectively utilizing limited resources.

Cons:

“If not a clearly identified role or charge, could be ‘another’ group with big ideas but lack action or connection to people of the watershed.”

1. Scale and complexity: Concerns about the vast scale and complexity of the Watershed can make efforts ineffective or unmanageable.
2. Potential for inaction: worry that without clear roles and charges, the initiative might stall.
3. Resource and control issues: There was fear expressed about the potential loss of control and redirection of resources to a partnership, hindering local efforts.
4. Inclusivity concerns: need to involve tribes and environmental justice groups in decision-making.

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Better coordination of projects, funding & resources. Increased impact to the health of the river.”



Photo ©Robert J. Hurt, Landscape Photography

Recommended near-term actions in service of key issue areas:

- Relationship and capabilities mapping and working groups: Suggested as essential steps to align goals and actions.
- Emphasized the importance of identifying shared vision and goals. Recommendations included developing a strategy, focusing on a select number of priorities around key issue areas, and setting clear goals. We also heard that decision-making needs to be transparent.
- Engagement with broader groups: invite other stakeholders like corporations, Tribal Nations, and regional leaders to provide input and have a voice.
- Coordinate data and information sharing. Inventory existing partnerships and work being done to gain a better understanding and access to what each Basin is doing as a foundation for collective work.
- Create a task force to drive next steps toward creating an umbrella which brings all Basin organizations together and benefits their individual efforts as well as collective work.

Motivations to engage:

1. Alignment and new sources of funds and capacity: Participants appeared to be motivated by the potential to align actions in ways that increase resources for their organizations as well as collective efforts.
2. Clearly defined priorities, next steps, and progress towards goals were viewed as key motivators.
3. Adoption of monitoring and information tools, including better access to expertise and information sharing.

Barriers to engage:

1. Existing high demands on staff.
2. Excessive time and resources required for collaboration or partnership work.
3. The potential lack of clear roles or impact.

Additional thoughts and ideas relevant to moving the Partnership forward:

1. Identify a clear value added role and goals that will lead to measurable outcomes.
2. Need more than a plan, create a roadmap for action. Create a relationship/power map.
3. The partnership needs an inclusive governance structure to ensure effective participation and decision-making including corporate, state, and federal, Tribal nations, NGOs, academia, among others. Consider rotating members and leadership.
4. Action might be more effective at the state or local level.
5. Emphasis on the need to assess what's already being done to avoid duplication and enhance collaboration.
6. Invite members of Basin groups to join one another's meetings as a way to cultivate cross-boundary relationships and share information.

What's Next

Next steps that are pragmatic and effective.

A majority of participants at the workshop expressed a strong interest in collaborating at a larger scale as long as it is with a clear, focused purpose and does not overly burden existing capacity. There was a clear call to action to build on the momentum from the workshop to create a partnership with a set of focused goals and objectives for broader Mississippi River Watershed action. We also heard the need for a Partnership guided by an efficient and representative decision-making process. With the upcoming U.S. national election, we want to act with a sense of urgency so that we are poised to work with a new administration.

1. Establish Clear Goals and Actions

To succeed, a Mississippi River Watershed Partnership must have a clear purpose, defined by a set of goals and actions that will serve to elevate Basin initiatives and guide collective action of priority interests and direct funding across the Watershed.

September 2024

Using the initial set of goals and actions identified during the workshop, AWI and TNC will work with the Workshop Planning Committee and Federal Partners to develop a collaborative process to solidify goals and identify actions that further Basin priorities and are viable in consideration of capacity availability and constraints.

October 2024

Based on the input above, we anticipate that working groups will be formed for each of the key issue areas. One or more virtual workshops will be hosted by AWI and TNC to refine Watershed-wide goals and actions.

November 2024

The work product coming out the working groups will be widely circulated, and additional comments incorporated resulting in a final set of Watershed wide goals and actions.

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It's about the design —a design for where we want to go, not where we are.”



2. Design an Organizational Structure

We know, from talking to hundreds of leaders and from the participants at the June workshop, that how a Mississippi River Partnership is structured is critical to ensure it enhances existing structures, communications, collaboration, and action on goals. We heard about the need for equitable representation as well as an entity that is nimble and which can act efficiently. Additionally, participants at the workshop raised questions and shared ideas about where responsibility and authority for making decisions should sit among partner organizations.

The following next steps will enable us to develop a structure for the partnership that is truly representative, and that will effectively implement these goals and actions. To create this structure, we will:

October 2024

Identify and engage individuals with organizational structure expertise to inform planning and participation in a November workshop to design a partnership structure. From the ideas proposed at the June workshop and from organizations experts, AWI and TNC will prepare a draft set of options to be discussed and refined at an in-person workshop.

November 2024

At an in-person workshop, with participants identified by the Planning Team and Federal Agency Leaders work to align around a potential structure and determine how the partnership will interface with existing Basin groups, federal partners working in the Watershed, and other local or regional groups. The assembled group will also begin to address the tools necessary to codify this structure (e.g. MOU's, Legislation, or other mechanisms). This proposal will then be shared with all workshop participants for additional comments and refinement.

December 2024

With input from all workshop participants received, finalize a proposed structure as well as suggested tools for codifying this structure.

“

With clear plans and meaningful progress, we think about the whole river.”



3. Bringing Goals, Actions, and Structure Together

We recognize that while we have cast a wide net in terms of engagement and input from across the Watershed, there are still important voices who may be missing from this process. To move the Mississippi River Watershed Partnership forward, the third portion of our work will be to bring together the goals, actions, and structure and to ground truth these with communities and leaders in the Watershed. We will also need to further develop the tool(s) selected to move this partnership forward. Toward that end, we will:

December 2024

Develop a communications and engagement plan to socialize these ideas with key constituencies, including the new administration, Tribal Nations, government leaders, NGOs, and industry.

2025

Determine the appropriate tool to codify the structure, goals, and actions. Then work with partners to build an implementation strategy depending on whether legislation is necessary.

Develop a communications and outreach plan to support broad outreach through multiple partners to continue to socialize this plan throughout the Watershed.

We want to thank everyone who helped design and actively participated in the workshop. The time spent together was productive yet there's still more to do as we seek to collaboratively shape a bright future for the Mississippi River Watershed.





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Mississippi River Watershed Partnership Workshop

WORKSHOP WEBPAGE:
www.americaswatershed.org/partnership

For questions about the workshop, please contact:

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