



Photo: Water Quality Event at Legvold Farm—taken by Margie O’Loughlin.

2023 COMMUNITY IMPACT REPORT

CLEAN RIVER
PARTNERS



OUR TEAM



Our mission is to inspire people and organizations to value, protect, and improve the Cannon River Watershed's land and water.

Our vision is a community that collaboratively creates and protects a watershed with healthy soils; drinkable groundwater; and clean, fishable, and swimmable rivers, lakes, and streams.

Our work is driven by four core values: building resilience, acting equitably, engaging intentionally, and inspiring hope.

Message from the Team

Thank you for taking the time to read our community impact report. We are thrilled to share all that we have accomplished in 2023, thanks to our donors, sponsors, foundation funders, and other partners. Together, we have made a significant impact in our environmental outreach and education work and have made progress on our signature projects.

Beyond our achievements, we have also invested time and effort into building a shared vision for Clean River Partners. Our 2024-2026 Strategic Framework outlines our community, land, and water commitments, and we have welcomed four new staff members to help us achieve our goals.

Our community has shown us that Clean River Partners has the power to bring people together and create positive change. Moving forward, we will continue to rely on our key skills: developing partnerships, empowering action, communicating with our community, and maintaining trustworthy administration. With the support and generosity of our partners, we are confident that we can make a real difference in the watershed!

Photo: (Pg 1) CRP Staff Jennifer Tonko and Kevin Strauss, presenting at Northfield Earth Day; (Pg 2) CRP Members at Cider on the Cannon—both taken by Margie O'Loughlin.



In 2023, our team grew by four new staff, and our organization welcomed 65 new members, bringing the total number of members to 314.

Staff Members



Jennifer Tonko (she/her)
Executive Director



Alan Kraus (he/him)
Conservation Program
Manager



Heron Mahr (they/them)
Community Engagement
Coordinator



Felicia Hokenstad (she/her)
Communications Coordinator



Teresa Tillson (she/her)
Administrative & Development
Assistant



Maggie Stahley (she/her)
Conservation Program
Assistant



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A Family's Journey to Conservation

Craig Koester, a current St. Paul resident, spent his childhood in Northfield, where his family owned and farmed the land that we now know as the Prairie Creek Wildlife Management Area. Growing up with this seemingly vast grassland that backed up to the “big woods” fed his sense of wonder and instilled in him a passion for conservation. Craig views stewardship as a sacred responsibility for current and future generations. As time progressed and his parents passed on, his family was confronted with a serious question. What do they do with the land?

The land was historically used for farming, but he and his siblings had no interest in pursuing agriculture. It's important to note that these native prairie and oak savannah habitats have been disappearing at alarming rates in Minnesota and globally. These habitats are crucial for maintaining biodiversity. The Koester family eagerly sought the advice of conservation experts, determined to preserve the land for future generations to enjoy. In 2014, the Koester family worked with The Trust for Public Land and the Minnesota DNR to designate it as a wildlife management area.

Caring for a wildlife management area takes a great deal of effort and collaboration. Clean River Partners, Minnesota DNR, and Friends of Prairie Creek WMA work together to secure grant funding for continuous habitat restoration. These days, Craig enjoys hosting groups on the site like birders, master naturalists, students from Carleton College and St. Olaf College, and local environmental nonprofits. He said his favorite activities at the Koester Prairie are patrolling for invasive species and collecting native seeds. It is important to him that this place remains accessible to the public, allowing people to renew, learn about our natural heritage, and explore.



For those who want to preserve their land, Craig suggests seeking resources from organizations such as Clean River Partners, the Minnesota DNR, and the Trust for Public Land. Various options are available depending on the land and the family's continued level of involvement. These groups can help determine the best fit for your needs. Craig has found that conservation requires a significant amount of local investment, and having the support of our organization was crucial. Clean River Partners plays a key role in encouraging community involvement and educating the public about the connection between water and land.

In June 2023, we held a public dedication event to celebrate the recent 138-acre addition to Prairie Creek Wildlife Management Area.

Hosting events like these are an excellent way to raise awareness about the importance of protecting and restoring habitats, as well as to engage with the community on how to do this work. Many of our habitat protection and restoration projects are supported by funding from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, as provided by the Outdoor Heritage Fund. Appropriations are approved by the Minnesota Legislature as recommended by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council.

Photo: (Pg 3) Craig Koester at the Prairie Creek WMA Dedication; (Pg 4) Habitat assessment conducted at Prairie Creek WMA by DJ Forbes (Trust for Public Land), Brad Gordon (Great River Greening), and Dave Kuhnau (The Friends of Prairie Creek WMA)—both taken by Alan Kraus.



Over the course of the year, we organized four field days and two land dedications, which over 300 community members attended.

Innovative Farmer Partnership Going Strong

Mark Legvold, a farmer in Bridgewater Township, takes great pride in his family's farming legacy. As a fifth-generation farmer, he understands the importance of keeping the soil and water healthy in the area. That's why he became part of the Farmers Protecting Bridgewater Streams project when it began five years ago.

Photo: Mark Legvold next to a MAWQC sign—taken by Margie O'Loughlin.

Mark's farm is adjacent to Rice Creek, a stream that runs through the area. He, along with a dozen other farmers, joined Clean River Partners in an effort to address the declining soil health and increasing soil erosion along Rice Creek. Together, they planted cover crops on about 1,000 acres of land in the Rice Creek watershed. These crops included plants like annual rye grass, winter rye, radish, kale, and clover that are interplanted with corn during the growing season or planted after soybean harvest in the fall.

The impact of this project has been significant. By planting cover crops and reducing tillage, the participating farmers have been able to improve soil and water quality by keeping nutrients in the soil and soil in the fields. Monitoring has confirmed that water quality in Rice Creek has improved in the last five years.



A 2023 survey revealed that farmers planted cover crops on 25,213 acres in the Cannon River Watershed.

Data derived from this project shows that cover crops can significantly reduce nitrates in tile drainage. Fields planted with cover crops have 30% less nitrate-nitrogen concentration than those planted without cover crops. Participating farmers have reported that cover crops did not affect corn or soybean yields, which were equivalent to the average yields in Rice County during this period.

Farmers Protecting Bridgewater Streams has succeeded because of the strength of its partnerships. The farmers, Clean River Partners, Rice County Soil and Water Conservation District, St. Olaf College, Fishers & Farmers Partnership, Bridgewater Township, Compeer Financial, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency have all come together to make a positive impact on the environment and the community.

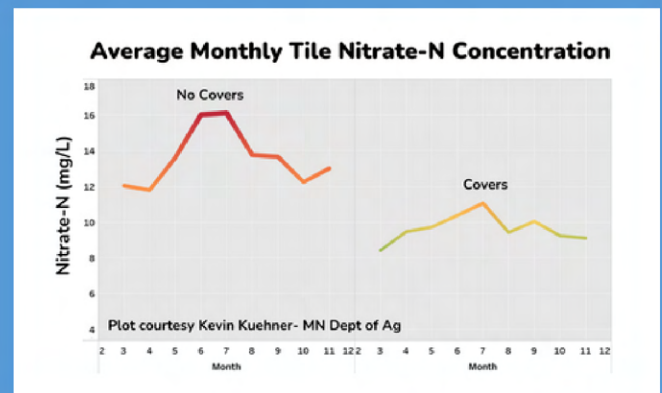
Photo: CRP Staff Maggie Stahley collecting water samples from Rice Creek for the Farmers Protecting Bridgewater Streams project—taken by Alan Kraus.



This chart presents a comparison between water leaving fields with and without cover crops through subsurface drainage tiles. The results show that water leaving fields with cover crops consistently has lower levels of nitrate-nitrogen than water leaving fields without cover crops. Tile drainage from fields planted with cover crops has nitrate concentrations slightly above or below 10 mg/L, which is the standard for drinking water. The chart is based on 757 water samples collected over six growing seasons.



Rice Creek's nitrate concentration decreased by 22% between 2019 and 2023, thanks in part to the efforts of this project.



A Sustainable & Community-Based Approach to Craft Beer

In an interview, Laura Meyers, co-owner of Imminent Brewing in Northfield, shared her passion for craft beer and the close-knit community it fosters. Although the taproom is a popular attraction at the brewery, it also serves as a community hub where visitors can socialize with friends, play board games, listen to music, and bring their dogs and kids. The company's unwavering commitment to fostering a safe, respectful, and dignified environment for all is truly admirable and inspiring.

Imminent Brewing not only serves delicious beer, but also strives to be a responsible member of the community and protect the environment. We love how they champion local farmers and growers by utilizing their ingredients to create delicious ales and lagers. We are delighted to share their team's story of sustainability and continued exploration with Kernza®.

Kernza® is the trademark name for the grain harvested from intermediate wheatgrass (*Thinopyrum intermedium*). This grain is in development at The Land Institute, with research support from many other interested organizations.

Photo: Laura and Derek Meyers with their pup outside of their establishment, Imminent Brewing — taken by Felicia Hokenstad.

Kernza® grain plants are deeply rooted perennial plants that don't require annual reseeding. The roots can extend 10 feet or more beneath the soil surface, delivering atmospheric carbon to the soil and efficiently taking up nutrients and water. Kernza® can be used as a whole grain, flour, and malted or mixed directly into beer and whiskey.



In late 2019, Clean River Partners orchestrated a collaboration between Imminent Brewing and the Milltown Mashers Home Brewing Club to experiment with brewing Kernza® beer. The winning recipe was selected, and Imminent Brewing produced a larger batch, which became available to the public in 2020. Laura mentioned that although it's been a learning experience to getting machinery to work with this new crop, the environmental impact makes it worthwhile.

Photo: Matt Leavitt (University of Minnesota Forever Green Initiative) is meeting with Bill & Dana Jokela in their field of organic Kernza® near Cannon Falls, MN—taken by Alan Kraus.

This year, we facilitated another collaboration between the Agricultural Utilization Research Institute, Forever Green Initiative, and the Land Institute to help Imminent Brewing launch a brown ale named "Sure Do!" This brew was crafted from a Minnesota-grown malted Kernza®. Laura acknowledged that they experienced significantly better results when using malted Kernza® grain in the brewing process. Working on projects like this leaves us feeling hopeful and excited about the future of perennial grains!



In 2023,
farmers in
the Cannon
River
Watershed
planted 67
acres of
Kernza®.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK



As a community, we know how important it is to work towards clean water, thriving soils, and a livable climate—for ourselves and for future generations. In 2023 we reflected on how Clean River Partners can better connect people to actions that support these goals. We considered our existing framework, the changing conditions in our world, and our organizational health and trajectory to envision 2024-2026. **The result is this strategic framework and a set of commitments to you, our community, who love and care for the land and water here.**

Photo: CRP Executive Director, Jennifer Tonko, presenting Cannon River Champions award to Nancy Braker—taken by Margie O’Loughlin.

Strategic Focus Areas

Water, Land, and Climate Health

Improve the environmental health of the Cannon River Watershed and the aquifers which support it by connecting, supporting, recognizing, and providing opportunities for residents, farmers, and landowners.

Organizational Capacity

Strengthen Clean River Partners’ organizational capacity and capabilities.

Community Relationships

Build relationships with individuals and organizations in the watershed, region, and state, and connect them to each other to inspire shared actions.

Connections

Create opportunities for people to directly experience the land and water of the Cannon River Watershed.

Key Skill Sets

Partnership Development

Facilitating connections between watershed community members, making individual changes more effective through a systems approach.

Empowering Action

Learning from others and providing community members with information, resources, and inspiration to take meaningful action toward watershed health.

Communication

Encourage productive dialogue and reach community members from all areas of the Cannon River Watershed.

Administration

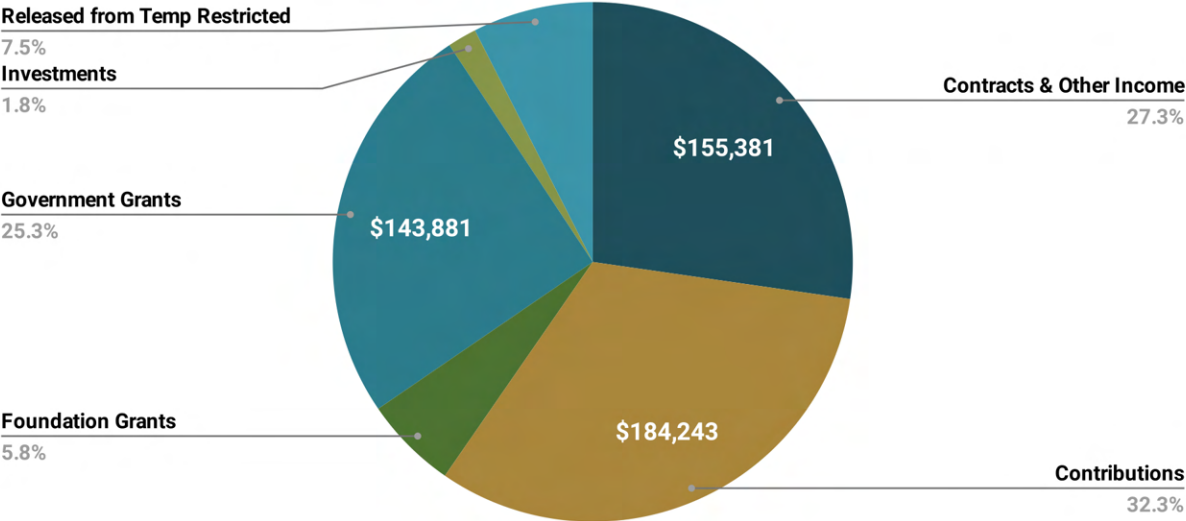
Maintain sound operating practices that enable the expansion of Clean River Partners’ programs and activities.

We are pleased to share with you that we finished the last year strong. In 2023, your support provided about 30% of our operating funds. These dollars are critical for exploring new opportunities and partnerships, providing a safe and functional working environment for our staff, and being flexible and creative when working toward community building and behavior change. Thank you for filling this crucial need! It really is true when we say we can't do this work without you!

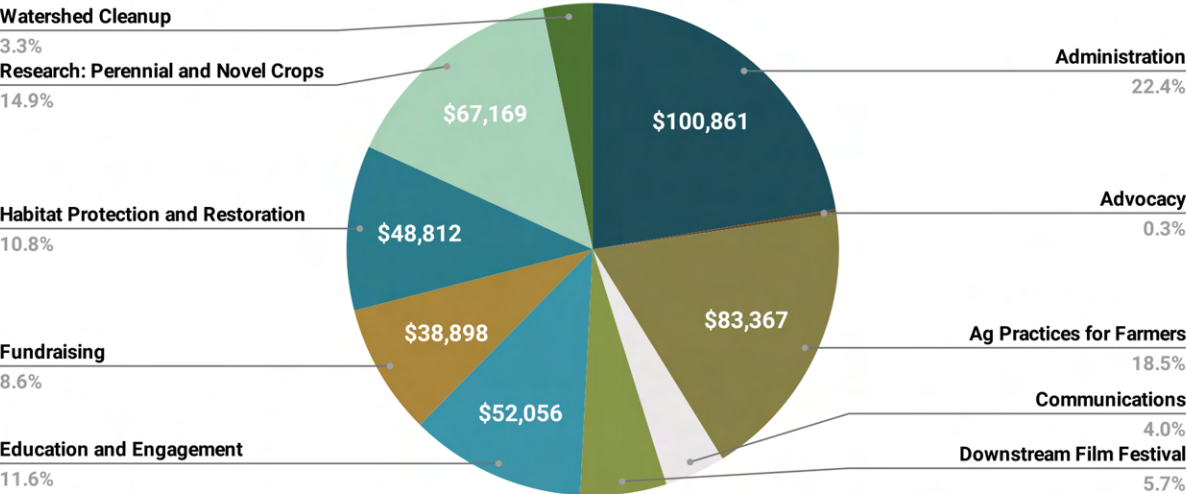
Photo: Walk-through of the Little Cannon River AMA—taken by Felicia Hokenstad.



Income: \$569,582



Expenses: \$450,646



Coming Together to Clean Up the Cannon

The Watershed-Wide Cleanup is an annual event hosted by our organization that unites communities in the Cannon River watershed to pick up litter in area parks, rivers, and lakes. Connecting the community to the watershed can inspire a sense of responsibility towards our environment, empowering us to keep the water healthy and clean. Through our collective efforts in 2023, we brought together 265 volunteers across 11 cleanup sites in the watershed, including Morehouse Park in Owatonna.

Photo: Volunteers (Audrey Revier on the left) at Morehouse Park in Owatonna, MN for the Watershed-Wide Cleanup—taken by Jennifer Tonko.

One of our cleanup volunteers is Audrey Revier. Growing up in Owatonna, MN, she developed a passion for biology and natural resource conservation at a young age. Audrey's first experience with Clean River Partners and our Watershed-Wide Cleanup was in middle school, and she's now a graduate of Wartburg College and a professional in the biology field. She has participated in our annual cleanup event at least four times, and we were curious about what motivates her to return.



Audrey's dedication and passion for cleaning up the watershed is genuinely inspiring. She takes pride in minimizing waste and considers it an opportunity to make a meaningful difference in her community. "The cleanup event is an excellent opportunity to get involved, but if you can't make it on that specific date, you can always pick up litter while you're on a walk in the park," said Audrey. The efforts of our volunteers have not gone unnoticed, as she has observed a significant reduction in trash during the cleanup since her initial experience.

Audrey emphasized the importance of having access to clean water, which is often taken for granted. She emphasizes the importance of organizations like Clean River Partners that advocate for preserving water resources. Audrey's story reminds us that even small actions can make a significant impact, and we can all work together to build a better, cleaner future for our planet.

Photo: Volunteers from Bushel Boy at Morehouse Park in Owatonna, MN for the Watershed-Wide Cleanup—taken by Jennifer Tonko.



In September, 265 volunteers dedicated an afternoon to participate in the Cannon River Watershed-Wide Cleanup.

On a Mission to Protect Pollinators and Clean Water

Meet Susan Erickson, a passionate environmental advocate who is strongly committed to protecting natural spaces. After traveling around the world and spending time in Denmark, she returned to her hometown of Faribault, Minnesota. Over the last 17 years, Susan has been working as a substitute teacher and volunteering for different environmental groups. Her motivation stems from her desire to create a better world for the children she interacts with daily.

Susan has spent a significant amount of time kayaking on the Straight River with her friends, finding it a therapeutic experience. Her time on the river allowed her to see the watershed as a living system significantly impacted by human activities like infrastructure and landscaping. These connections, both with nature and friends, eventually led to her involvement with our organization and some volunteer work in the watershed.

During her time with CRP, Susan came across another group that shares our dedication to environmental sustainability, Partners for Pollinators (PFP). PFP is a committee within GROWS (Gardeners Reaching Out With Services) that works with the City of Faribault to protect and restore native pollinator populations. This experience was a turning point for Susan, who found a cause close to her heart in advocating for pollinators and clean water.

Photo: Susan Erickson in her pollinator garden—taken by Liz Hartman.



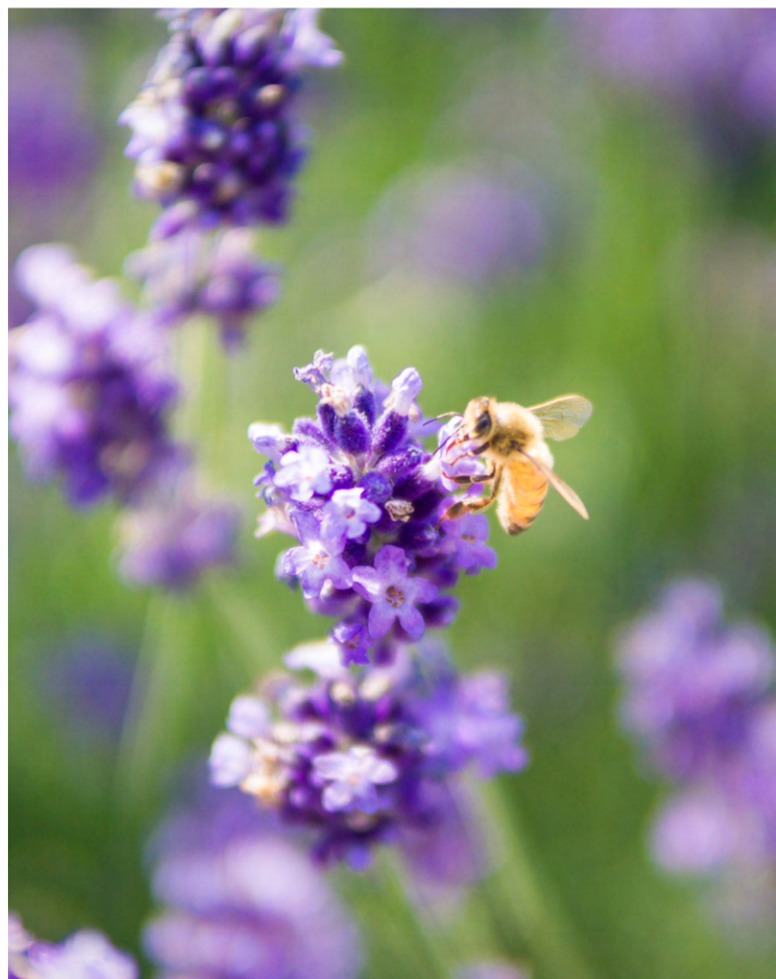
Our stormwater education program reached 25 classes in Northfield and 13 in Faribault with the help of our partners at River Bend Nature Center.

Through her involvement with both organizations, Susan better understood the changes she could make at home and in the community to benefit the environment. She began by planting small shrubs and trees while learning about native flowers. Her ultimate goal was to create a pollinator-friendly backyard while minimizing the use of plastic and chemicals. To achieve this, she worked with cardboard to prevent weed growth and leaves to insulate from winter weather. As her knowledge and skills grew, so did her pollinator garden.

Susan recommended that new gardeners start with a small garden and use online resources and local nurseries to get started. The City of Faribault and the Rice County Soil and Water Conservation District websites are great places to start. She also suggests signing up for Minnesota's Lawns to Legumes program, which provides workshops, coaching, planting guides, and cost-share funding to install pollinator-friendly native plants in residential lawns. Susan remains active in our organization and helped us write an article for the local newspaper on why you should switch to native plants.

Photo: Bee pollinating lavender in the garden—taken by Getty Images.

And while this is a worthy cause, it's not the only way people can help pollinators. Susan wants us to know that using fewer fossil fuels, composting, choosing organic products, and supporting local businesses are other ways we can make a positive impact on our communities and help create a healthier environment for pollinators AND people. "Right now, in general, we are taking more than we are giving back," says Susan. "I am grateful for groups like Clean River Partners and Partners for Pollinators that are giving back and teaching others how to help."



THANK YOU, MEMBERS

Adam Sanders
Adrienne Falcon & Dave Geist
Alan & Emily Kraus
Allene Moesler
Allison Donahue
Alyssa Herzog Melby
Amy & Kevin Allin
Amy Pagel
Amy Smith
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Andrei & Wendy Sivanich
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Grant & Foundation Support

We want to express our gratitude to all our wonderful members, sponsors, and partners. Their incredible support and collaboration make it possible for us to carry out our mission. Thank you all!

- Bridgewater Township
- Clean Water Fund, Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)
- Cannon River Watershed Joint Powers Board
- Carl and Verna Schmidt Foundation
- Carleton College
- Henkel Foundation
- Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
- Minnesota Soil Health Coalition
- Northfield Shares
- Patagonia Foundation
- University of Minnesota-Forever Green Initiative
- Xcel Energy Foundation



**CLEAN RIVER
PARTNERS**



205 Water Street South
Northfield, MN 55057



Photo: Carbon Markets, Kernza & Water Quality Field Day—provided by Land Stewardship Project.