



Working to protect the Mississippi River
and its watershed in the Twin Cities area.

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Congresswoman Betty McCollum
Chair – House Committee on Appropriations;
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
2256 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Testimony on the FY21 U.S. House Interior-Environment Appropriations Bill

Dear Congresswoman McCollum,

On behalf of the staff, board and membership of Friends of the Mississippi River, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on the U.S. House Interior-Environment Appropriations Bill for Fiscal Year 2021.

About Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR)

As you know, the 72 miles of the Mississippi River through the Twin Cities is a unit of the National Park Service: The Mississippi National River & Recreation Area.

FMR is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that was formed shortly after this National Park was created to a mission to work with local residents to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities region.

Through land conservation, river corridor management, stewardship & education, and water quality policy advocacy, we work with thousands of Minnesotans each year to help protect and restore our great river.

Unfortunately, the river is in need of assistance.

- Recent floods have been catastrophic for riverside communities and our economy, threatening communities throughout the river corridor and beyond. Sadly, we anticipate severe flooding again in 2020.
- Water quality remains a concern, as farm fertilizers, wastewater effluent and stormwater runoff are impairing many reaches of the river, which terminates in a Gulf Hypoxic Zone that shows little signs of abating.
- A variety of threats loom on the horizon. Invasive species are moving up the river and pose real threats to aquatic life, recreation and public safety. Climate change threatens to supercharge river pollution and exacerbate

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already costly and dangerous flooding. Chemical contaminants like PFAS pose serious and long-term risks to human health and river life.

While threats are deeply troubling, there are several exciting opportunities on the horizon for the river which I'd like to share with you.

Investing in the River Learning Center

The committee may be aware of the effort to co-locate Mississippi River National River & Recreation Area (MNRRA) National Park Service headquarters at a new River Learning Center (RLC) on the Mississippi River in St. Paul.

The RLC will be a National Park Service visitor center and an environmental learning center for MNRRA and nonprofit partners to provide educational and recreational opportunities right on the river in the heart of the city.

This is an exciting opportunity to create the next generation of park users and river stewards. The RLC will be at the current Watergate Marina site, right between Hidden Falls and Crosby Farm regional parks.

This project will:

- Create the next generation of park users and river stewards who care about and protect the river;
- Transform what is now a strategic but underutilized, isolated edge of Saint Paul to an accessible regional center of activity;
- Leverage the Mississippi River, the naturalized urban location, and public and private partnerships to stimulate economic development and act as a catalyst for future strategic development to improve quality of life for the community and health of the river;
- Create jobs in design, construction, maintenance and operations, education, recreation, food, and marine services;
- Develop strategic partnerships for revenue generating opportunities and cost sharing;
- Leverage public dollars for private investment;
- Develop year-round environmental, cultural and historical education and recreation opportunities that are integrated into the community and region's routines, traditions and collective identity.

The City of St. Paul and the Great River Passage Conservancy are leading this project, with FMR as one of several supporting organizations. The National Park Service and the city in January signed an agreement to work together to make this happen.

St. Paul has submitted a state bonding request for \$3 million to support RLC design and community engagement which would get the project to shovel-ready status. We're pleased that Governor Walz has included the full \$3M request in his bonding recommendations this year.

We're grateful for the support and guidance you and your staff have provided this project to date and look forward to working closely with you to bring this project to completion. For more information on the RLC proposal, please visit the Mississippi Park Connection's RLC [project description](#).

The promise of the Forever Green Initiative & Forever Green Partnership

Minnesota is home to a \$20 billion agricultural industry that has formed the backbone of our state's economy for generations, but farmers - particularly independent and smaller operations - are struggling through one of the toughest stretches in memory.

Trade challenges, climate change and rising expenses are just a few of the headwinds they face. The forces exerted by industrialization and globalization have also narrowed farmers' options for a profitable harvest, as markets reward increasingly few commodity crops that are heavily reliant on costly fertilizer and pesticide inputs.

There are costs to this approach: Excess fertilizers runoff field and through drain tiles into surface waters ecosystems and drinking water supplies. Cropland and animal agriculture are also significant sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Meanwhile, the land itself has lost its natural resilience after decades of plowing and monoculture. Despite decades of planning and programs to fix these problems, we have seen insufficient progress, and it's clear that Minnesota and the upper-Midwest needs a new farming paradigm.

With a problem this big and widespread, it's vital that we find profitable solutions for farmers that scale across a broad landscape at a reasonable cost to taxpayers. It's also important that these changes are permanent, to help mitigate climate impacts.

There is only one solution that addresses each of these elements: [Clean-water crops](#) grown in [continuous living cover](#) systems.

The Forever Green Partnership is a major new endeavor to promote these solutions that emerged out of conversations between Friends of the Mississippi River, the University of Minnesota, Minnesota Environmental Partnership and Green Lands Blue Waters.

Our vision is a network of farmers, agribusinesses, researchers and environmental organizations pulling in unison for a fundamental shift in what we grow and how we grow it in Minnesota, the Upper Midwest, and eventually, the rest of the country. It may not always be possible or desirable to replace row crops, but we need to diversify our landscape.

This network will get smarter together about clean water crops and continuous living cover practices by sharing information, convening gatherings and leading collaborative projects.

We are aiming for an official launch of the Forever Green Partnership in spring 2020, with activity quickly ramping up including the establishment of working groups to focus on key elements such as communications and government policies, market opportunities like aviation biofuels, and more.

The Forever Green Partnership is currently operating thanks to a modest (but vital) two-year appropriation from the State of Minnesota, but further state and federal support will be necessary to fulfill its immense promise.

Additionally, numerous opportunities exist within the Farm Bill and other legislation to advance research and implementation of clean water crops and continuous living cover practices.

We look forward to working with Congress to educate members about these issues and advance

our shared objectives of a healthy, profitable, and sustainable American agricultural system.

The Mississippi River: Toward Restoration & Resilience

Despite its national significance, the Mississippi River lacks a comprehensive federal restoration and resilience strategy. Federal funding for river management is split across multiple federal agencies and state and local governments, some of which work at cross purposes.

Several high-profile national waters of significance are the beneficiaries of dedicated federal planning and funding initiatives, including the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Puget Sound Partnership, Chesapeake Bay Program and the Everglades Restoration Initiative.

Restoring our Mississippi River requires enhanced funding and coordination throughout the river corridor.

More than ever, we see the need for a coordinated and multidisciplinary strategy that brings federal, state and local resources to bear on five major domains of river management:

- Clean Water: Improving water quality in the river and Gulf of Mexico
- Natural Infrastructure: Enhancing river resilience and floodplain access
- Delta Restoration: Protecting and restore gulf delta
- River Corridor Habitat: Enhancing wildlife habitat throughout river corridor
- Invasive Species: Preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species

We are working with an emerging coalition of river organizations throughout the main-stem river states to explore such an initiative, and we hope to work with Congress to develop a platform to allow us to better target funding to address key river issues in the future.

On behalf of our staff, board and the thousands of Minnesotans we work with each year, thank you for your leadership on Mississippi River issues, and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Thank you,

Whitney L. Clark



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