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# MISSISSIPPI RIVER

**THREAT:** Pollution, habitat loss

## STATES:

Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana

## AT RISK:

Clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, biodiversity, local economies, and public health and safety

## SUMMARY

The Mississippi River supports millions of people and countless birds, fish and other wildlife. Despite the importance of this critical river corridor, habitat is being degraded, new sources of water contamination go unchecked, wetlands continue to be drained and lost, and flood damages are escalating. To respond to these threats, Congress should establish a new geographic program overseen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that focuses on ecosystem health, conservation and restoration of the Mississippi River through the passage of the Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Act.

MISSISSIPPI RIVER IN ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA  
PHOTO: TOM REITER FOR FRIENDS OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

## THE RIVER

The Mississippi River is an internationally important river ecosystem and an ecological lifeline for North America. The river and its 30-million-acre floodplain provide vital habitat for more than 870 species of fish and wildlife, including dozens of rare, threatened and endangered species. The Mississippi River is a critically important global migration corridor for more than 325 bird species, dozens of migratory fish and even pollinators such as the monarch butterfly. The Mississippi River has brought cultural and economic wealth to people since they first settled along the river. The largest pre-colonial settlement in North America thrived along the banks near present day East St. Louis, Illinois. Cahokia was a major metropolitan center the size of contemporary London in the 11th and 12th Centuries. Today, nearly 20 million people live in the 123 counties that border the Mississippi River. The Mississippi watershed covers 41 percent of the contiguous United States and provides drinking water to more than 50 municipalities.

The river is also a crucial economic engine, generating more than \$400 billion in ecosystem services annually and supporting 1.3 million jobs. It provides a water source for industry, a significant transportation route for grain and cargo, a recreational destination for tourists, bicyclists, boaters, hunters, anglers and birders, and transports sediment and nutrients that, at appropriate levels, help Gulf Coast wetlands and fisheries thrive.

## THE THREAT

The Mississippi River has always provided abundant food, drinking water, natural resources, paths for travel and cultural and economic wealth. However, we have failed to conserve, protect and restore that river which provides so much for us. New contaminants, like microplastics and pharmaceuticals, are impacting water quality in places such as Newport and Lake Pepin, Minnesota. Water infrastructure is degraded and inadequate to handle shifts in precipitation driven by climate change. The Mississippi River has one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet. There have been efforts to rehabilitate habitat. Yet the river is still in decline because state and federal programs are not coordinated and under-resourced.

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# MISSISSIPPI RIVER

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Arkansas:  
Arkansas Wildlife Federation
- Illinois:  
Illinois Environmental Council
- Iowa:  
Iowa Environmental Council
- Kentucky:  
Kentucky Waterways Alliance
- Minnesota:  
Friends of the Mississippi River
- Mississippi & Louisiana:  
Healthy Gulf
- Missouri:  
Conservation Federation of Missouri
- Tennessee:  
Green Interchange
- Wisconsin:  
Clean Wisconsin

## TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/  
MississippiRiver2022](https://AmericanRivers.org/MississippiRiver2022)



MISSISSIPPI RIVER, LOUISIANA

PHOTO: HEALTHY GULF

Pollution from farm fertilizers is contaminating drinking water and causing toxic algal blooms in and along the Mississippi River. In Des Moines, Iowa, residents will be paying \$333 million in the next four years to remove nitrogen from their drinking water. In Louisiana, the pollution has created a more than 6,000 square mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. All of these issues are harming the economy, which depends on a healthy, resilient Mississippi River to sustainably deliver a multitude of ecosystem services.

Historically, white colonists segregated Indigenous, immigrant, Black, poor and other non-dominant social groups to the Mississippi River floodplains. They bear the brunt of flooding and poor river management to this day. The Mississippi River is a transportation corridor; consequently, the adjacent floodplains are home to many

polluting industries. The under-resourced communities living in the Mississippi River floodplain are subject to frequent flooding and flood-related health and safety issues. Many are designated environmental justice zones by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency due to air, water and/or land pollution issues.

The climate crisis and unsustainable development are compounding the threats facing Mississippi River communities. Changes in precipitation are exacerbating flooding— carrying more pollution from farm fertilizers, sediment and other pollutants off the land and into the river. Sea level rise accelerates coastal wetland loss and saltwater intrusion, degrading freshwater ecosystems, reducing water quality and increasing flood risks for communities. Rising temperatures also contribute to toxic algae outbreaks that create hypoxic dead zones. Unsustainable development that drains wetlands, disconnects floodplains and confines the dynamic Mississippi River contributes to the global extinction crisis. These factors impact public safety, drinking water quality and the vitality of local economies.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Many iconic waters in the nation have federal geographic programs focused on their health, conservation and restoration; however, no such program exists for the Mississippi River. Congress must fill this gap by passing the Mississippi River Restoration Initiative (MRRRI) Act (HR 4202), which authorizes a geographic program for the Mississippi River under the purview of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that transcends political boundaries and addresses public health and environmental threats. The MRRRI Act is modeled on the successful Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which has had bipartisan support for its powerful non-regulatory approach and impact. Congress needs to establish a similar non-regulatory program for the Mississippi River to provide additional federal resources, grant opportunities, coordination and scientific expertise to support new conservation and environmental restoration efforts in the ten Mississippi River mainstem states.