

Milwaukee Riverkeeper: New report celebrates progress, shares continued conservation key to protecting the Milwaukee River Basin

Posted on Friday, Jan 6, 2023

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

MILWAUKEE - Each year, Milwaukee Riverkeeper releases an Annual River Basin Report Card, detailing the health of the Milwaukee River Basin's three major waterways: the Milwaukee River, the Menomonee River and the Kinnickinnic River. This year's report highlights the progress that's been made since the Clean Water Act was passed nearly 50 years ago. That landmark legislation laid the groundwork for groups like Milwaukee Riverkeeper to push for strong river protections and enforcement of regulations.

"We have come a long way from the days when the Kinnickinnic River and Lincoln Creek used to catch on fire. It's worth celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Clean Water Act and our collective progress toward achieving our goals of clean, fishable, swimmable, and drinkable water," said Riverkeeper Cheryl Nenn. "But we still have a long way to go, as many of our communities are still experiencing the harmful effects of pollution, flooding, habitat destruction, and climate change. We must help elevate these voices, and help address the many barriers they face in achieving solutions to these problems, in order to fulfill the true promise of the Clean Water Act."

This report focuses on data collected by Milwaukee Riverkeeper's dedicated corps of volunteers in 2021. Over 100 volunteer water quality monitors put in over 1400 volunteer hours annually. Many individuals have monitored their site for a decade or more, serving as experts on their section of river, often first on the scene to report pollution, discover water main breaks and report illegal dumping. Collaboration is a

critical component of watershed restoration. This report includes data from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, MMSD, Ozaukee County, SEWRPC, and other community organizations. Improvements to river health take time, investment, and strong partnership to accomplish.

“Much like our rivers are the lifeblood of our community, our volunteers are the heartbeat of Milwaukee Riverkeeper. Without their commitment to our waterways, our work wouldn’t be possible.” said Executive Director, Jennifer Bolger Breceda.

While overall improvements to river health may be hard to see year to year, Bolger Breceda believes the key to protecting and restoring the Milwaukee River Basin lies in continued commitment and collaboration.

“Restoring and revitalizing our rivers is a big job. It takes the commitment of individuals, groups, organizations and agencies to achieve real change. We’ve seen that over the past 50 years, and now it’s critical we double down on our efforts. ” says Bolger Breceda.

TOP TAKEAWAYS:

The Milwaukee River Basin scored a D+ (68.82%) in overall river health. This grade is determined by comparing water quality data for each monitoring site, subwatershed, and watershed against a set of targets. This year’s grade remains close to last year’s grade of a C- (70.68%). The slight decrease in grade is likely the result of having more data in 2021 than 2020, when the pandemic forced a late start to the monitoring season. More data gives a more accurate result. The 2021 grades are very similar to 2019 or pre-pandemic grades.

Overall, to get our rivers to swimmable and fishable, we must address issues related to stormwater runoff, including reducing sources of phosphorus (fertilizers, manure, sewage), bacteria (sewage, manure, wildlife & pet waste), chloride (road salt, well softeners, food manufacturing, wastewater), and conductivity (sewage, manure, fertilizer, road salt, industrial waste).

Large scale policy change is necessary if we ever want to fully address these water quality issues in the Milwaukee River Basin. The looming threat of climate change, which in our area looks like extreme and volatile wet-weather events, makes upgrading leaky sewer infrastructure, infiltrating as much water as possible, protecting our soils, and minimizing polluted runoff even more important.

As for how people can get involved? You can join in the effort to improve your local river by participating in local cleanups and restoration activities, advocating for change in your community, and minimizing your use of fertilizers, road salt, and other chemicals at home and work. [Read the full report](#) and find other ways to get involved at www.milwaukeekeeper.org.