



AUTUMN 2025

Protecting, restoring and enhancing the metro Mississippi together since 1993

How the metro riverfront gained strong, cohesive protections

TOM REITER

The story of one of the most far-reaching accomplishments for the river since FMR's founding

By Ellie Rogers, Communications Manager

Hundreds of steel pilings stick out of the ground near the Mississippi and Minnesota river confluence in St. Paul — the ghost of a development project that never came to be.

In the late 1960s, developers wanted to build two 24-story luxury apartment buildings there, threatening the natural riverfront. Dedicated advocates pushed back, and the plan was abandoned. But pilings aren't the only legacy from this story. Opposition to that project helped catalyze community advocates urging a different vision for the Mississippi in the metro, one that could return the river to health and value it as the lifeblood of our cities.

Protections fall short

Two official designations honored the river advocates' vision. In 1976, Gov. Wendell Anderson signed a state executive order creating the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area to protect its natural, cultural and scenic resources. Federal recognition soon followed in 1988 for the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area along the same 72-mile stretch.

These designations, though significant, didn't come with airtight legal protections. Imprecise guidelines resulted in inconsistent approaches to development

by each of the critical area's 25 cities and townships. Executive Director Whitney Clark remembers, "It always seemed like we weren't fighting on solid ground."

The existing critical area standards weren't working for environmental advocates. But decisionmakers and developers also had a hard time determining what was legal and fair. In 2007, in a bid for clarity, FMR led a study looking at potential fixes. The most enduring solution, FMR thought, was to create precise, science-based state rules that would apply up and down the metro river corridor.

The 2009 legislative session was busy. "We were up at the Capitol constantly," Whitney recalls, "talking to people on both sides of the aisle, pushing for reform." The result was a bill that gave the Department of Natural Resources the go-ahead to create consistent state rules. But Whitney doesn't remember celebrating: "I remember immediately starting to think about how we would get the rules done."

Stronger rules for the river

It wasn't FMR's job to get the rules done. That was up to the DNR. But since its founding, FMR's job has been to take a seat at the table as a voice for the river. Over the next seven years, Irene Jones, former FMR River Corridor Program Director, worked with thousands of local

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Mission

Friends of the Mississippi River engages people to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities region.

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Staying with the work

By Whitney Clark, Executive Director

One of the advantages of longevity in my job (28 years and counting!) is the perspective it affords me on the pace of change and the power of persistence.

Friends of the Mississippi River was formed 32 years ago, in part because our founders thought there needed to be an organization that could stay focused on the health of the great river. What was needed, they felt, was an advocate for the river that could lead long-term, sometimes slow-developing work — work that might require patience and perseverance over many years or even decades.

If we look into the conservation and restoration history of just one stretch of riverfront, the Pine Bend Bluffs Natural Area in Dakota County, we see what perseverance can achieve. Surveys in the 1990s pointed to this area as both outstanding in biological diversity and threatened. Since then, we've worked with partners to permanently protect that land, parcel by parcel, and to improve its vital habitat. The result? A 1,300-acre conservation corridor along the dramatic western bluffs of the Mississippi River south of the metro.

Over the last 25 years, we've protected and restored more than 90 parcels totaling 4,700+ acres across 10 counties. That adds up to real impact on the health of the river and the birds, turtles, pollinators and people who use and depend on these places.

Another example of work that has required dogged persistence is the effort to extend land-use protections to the 25 cities and townships in the state-designated Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (see cover story). This effort to protect and preserve the metro riverfront has taken nearly two decades,



thousands of hours of advocacy and consistent member support.

Along the way, critical area reform survived a repeal by the Legislature, a lengthy rulemaking process and the adoption of new critical area plans and ordinances by 24 of the 25 cities. (Come on St. Paul. You can do it!) We are so close to being able to celebrate the completion of enduring and legally enforceable protections for the Mississippi in the Twin Cities.

Sometimes the work of protecting and restoring a river is fast-moving and exciting. But perhaps I'm most proud of the initiatives that have required years to develop vision and strategy, adaptations as conditions change and patience to persist through the setbacks. These initiatives have also accomplished the most impactful and durable outcomes. I am hopeful that a decade on, we may look back on some of FMR's current efforts — such as our work on the future of two metro locks and dams, or our vision for river-friendly agriculture — with great appreciation for the power of persistence.

I'm grateful to our members, volunteers and advocates who have taken the long view with us and supported this work for so long. I believe that, even in the face of opposition, our shared commitment to staying with this work for the long haul will bring about critical, lasting change for the river.

MEET OUR NEWEST STAFF & BOARD MEMBERS

Meghan Anderson:
Biofuels Policy Manager



After 10 years as an engineer, Meghan decided to make a career shift. She recently earned her master's degree in environmental policy, and focused her studies on sustainable aviation fuels.

Favorite river spot: The Pike Island hiking trails

Jenna Hawkes: Grassroots
Organizing Coordinator



This advocacy position is a natural next step for Jenna, a recent Macalester College graduate with a passion for environmental justice, community-building and agriculture.

Favorite river spot: Shadow Falls Park or the Stone Arch Bridge

Yumi Kashiara:
Board Member



Yumi has interned with FMR and worked with our youth program. Now she's joined our board as she pursues her master's degree and researches historical wetland and water changes at Pig's Eye Lake.

Favorite river spot: Boom Island Park and Nicollet Island

PROGRAM SNAPSHOTS

Top stories from fmr.org

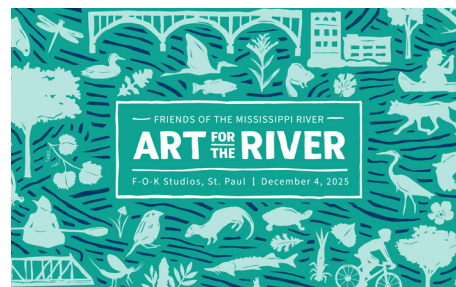
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Invasive carp deterrent moves ahead

Last year we helped secure state funding to stop carp. We share the latest on a key prevention measure.

Learn more at fmr.org/carp-2025



Join us for Art for the River

Get tickets for our river-inspired art exhibition opening, with artist talks, art-making, local food and drinks.

Register at fmr.org/our-river-events



Tell Congress: Hands off Minnesota's national parks

Join 1,000+ in speaking out for national parks, including the river recreation area here in the metro.

Take action at fmr.org/national-parks-2025



Oxygen-starved 'dead zone' in Gulf nearly as big as Connecticut

The size of the Gulf dead zone depends in part on choices we make here in the headwaters state.

Learn more at fmr.org/dead-zone-2025



Sheep graze the way for native plants at solar site

Nearly 500 solar grazers have been eating weeds to make room for native plants around solar panels.

See more sheep at fmr.org/sheep-2025

3 ways FMR pairs experience and education

By Jacob Cunningham, Stewardship & Education Program Director

Alex Carroll began volunteering at FMR events with her dad while she was still in high school. Together they hauled buckthorn, collected prairie seed, and joined other FMR volunteers in transforming dense, weedy thickets into light-filled habitat in the watershed. Reflecting on those years, Alex said, “Volunteering with FMR broadened my perspective on what biology careers were possible. Working alongside ecologists like Alex Roth and Karen Schik was inspiring.” Alex interned at FMR and is now a field biologist.

Alex’s story echoes what the research on outdoor education shows: Meaningful time in nature helps people develop a love for the outdoors and a commitment to protecting it. That’s why FMR strives to create access to the river, coupled with education and the chance to make a difference. Here are just a few of the ways we integrate learning and doing.



Experiential learning with grade-schoolers

Our classroom education program focuses on experiential education. At Dowling Elementary in Minneapolis, students learned how soil erosion affects water quality, hiked the gorge’s oak savanna trails and journaled about what they saw. Youth Program Manager Sovatha Oum remembers how the students seemed “calm and fully immersed in the experience.”

With guidance from FMR staff, these kinds of encounters can be formative. They plant the seeds of stewardship early, showing that caring for the river is a lifelong path.



Summer paddles with Environmental Stewardship Institute youth

Through ESI, high school students join mentors to paddle local waters, learning about ecology, Dakota connections and more. These trips offer chances for career exploration and leadership practice.

ESI Program Associate Naomi Nickel said, “These outings are many participants’ first experience getting into a canoe or kayak.” Each summer, she sees them grow in confidence. “Some have even told me they’re excited to bring their friends out and use Paddle Share.” Naomi also sees growth in their sense of wonder about this river — its history and its future.



Paddle, restore and learn event series for the community

This year, we launched a trio of free events that combine the experience of being on the river with hands-on conservation and education. Paddlers feel the flow and rhythm of the Mississippi before joining FMR staff to dig into restoration and learn about different aspects of the river and the challenges it faces.

We focused these seed collection and planting events around the Mississippi and Elk River confluence, the Minneapolis river gorge and an oxbow lake in Hastings.

Learn more at fmr.org/stew-ed

The Mississippi River Greenway: A corridor for people and wildlife

By Laura Domyancich-Lee, Senior Ecologist
and Dr. Alex Roth, Conservation Director

Dakota County is home to some of the state's premier greenways — trails you can bike, walk or roll that connect cities, parks and other places of interest. But these greenways aren't just for human use. The trails and their surroundings can create essential habitat corridors that wind throughout the county, linking natural areas and allowing for the movement of plants and animals. Since 2022, FMR has been a partner in planning habitat along these greenways, most recently the county's Mississippi River Greenway.

Greening the greenway

FMR's new natural resources management plan for the greenway, set to be approved after a recent public comment period, will inform how the county manages habitat along the trail. The plan also presents opportunities for additional protection and restoration projects, and ensures that natural resources remain a focus of the greenway system now and in the future.

To make this plan, our ecologists surveyed all 28 linear miles of trail by foot, bike and car. We identified every potential habitat node (natural area) near the trail that comprises the greenway, like Pine Bend Bluffs or Spring Lake Park. Then we considered how spaces along the trail between nodes could form habitat corridors if even small stretches and pockets of turfgrass or degraded land were restored to native habitat. Our plan sets out trailside restoration projects that could create these connections.

Just 100 feet on either side of the trail can provide real habitat benefits.



The 28-mile Mississippi River Greenway follows the Mississippi River from the southern edge of South Saint Paul through Inver Grove Heights, Rosemount and Nininger Township to Hastings.

A habitat highway

Long stretches of trailside habitat, though narrow, will become a ribbon of resources and a highway for wildlife movement. Here are a few examples of how animals will benefit from the enhanced Mississippi River Greenway.

Birds



Birds use the greenway's natural course along the Mississippi during migration and breeding. Habitat nodes along the trail act as rest stops, providing resources like food and nesting trees.



Turtles

Where the greenway crosses a road, species like turtles can pass through the trail's culverts to reach wetlands on either side.



Pollinators

Pollinators like the rusty-patched bumble bee and monarch butterfly will find milkweed, blooms, nectar and shelter galore in 28 miles of connected habitat.



Fishers

Fishers have already been tracked moving north along the Mississippi River Greenway from Spring Lake Park Reserve.

PHOTOS: USFWS AND DAKOTA COUNTY

FMR relishes being able to think big when it comes to habitat planning, and we're excited for the future implementation of restoration projects along this and other Dakota County greenway corridors.

Learn more at fmr.org/greenways

How we can get sustainable aviation fuel right for our waters — and lands

By Meghan Anderson, Biofuels Policy Manager

Sustainable aviation fuel has the potential to be a powerful climate solution. But if not done right, it could be a big problem for our waters. Crops like corn and soybeans could produce lower-carbon fuel, but they grow only during the summer. The rest of the year, there are no living plants in the ground to stop soil and agricultural chemicals from washing off into our lakes and streams. And no living roots prevent excess fertilizer from seeping into our groundwater. This cropland runoff is by far the largest source of pollution to the Mississippi River.

If we relied exclusively on new corn or soy production for sustainable aviation fuel, Minnesota would need an additional 1 million acres of corn fields or over 4 million acres of soybean fields just for flights from MSP airport. As the aviation industry looks to agriculture for lower-carbon fuel sources and drives the need for millions of acres of crops, what will happen not only to our waters, but our lands?

This shift could result in a chain reaction of habitat loss, in which natural lands here in the U.S. and in places like the

Amazon are plowed under to serve conventional markets that would otherwise lose their supply.

River-friendly alternative requires no new cropland

FMR advocates for sustainable aviation fuel made from winter-hardy oilseeds, which improve water quality by covering the big brown spot on agricultural lands from fall to spring.

But these oilseeds come with another significant environmental benefit: More than the other crops being considered for airplane fuel, they also help ensure we don't convert more natural lands into croplands. Winter-hardy oilseeds grow on the same acres as primary summer crops (such as corn or soybeans). They neither incentivize the conversion of Minnesota grasslands or forests into farmland, nor drive deforestation in other countries. Researchers are even studying their potential to provide habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

Preventing indirect land use change

As the sustainable aviation fuel industry gets off the ground, we're working with state and federal legislators to ensure that policies incentivize the most truly sustainable sources. At the state level, we've brought together a wide range of stakeholders to agree on measures preventing new land from being converted to farmland to make aviation fuel. At the federal level, we're playing defense to try to block the most harmful sustainable aviation fuel changes of this administration.

Sustainable aviation fuel needs appropriate guardrails. If we can scale up using sustainable farming practices and crops without wide-scale land conversion, sustainable aviation fuel could benefit the aviation industry, Minnesota farmers and our lands and waters at the same time.



FMR in MinnPost: 'A rebuke of science and the promise of sustainable aviation fuel'

In an August MinnPost commentary, FMR Water Program Director Trevor Russell lays out the problems with a biofuels tax provision nestled into a recent federal bill. The provision changes how we count emissions from crop-based fuels, recklessly ignoring the emissions consequences of converting forests, grasslands and wetlands into cropland.

Read the commentary: fmr.org/rebuke

Learn more at fmr.org/SAF

(continued from front page)

DAVID WHEATON

advocates and organizations to engage in the process, lauding community members “willing to learn the nitty gritty and weigh in on planning.” FMR staff participated in scores of meetings, reviewed and made comments at each stage, staying attentive to details that could make a big impact for the river. One example was FMR’s push for a clearer, expanded definition of what constitutes a “bluff.” A better definition, paired with building setback rules, would mean more protection for rugged shorelines and the waters below.

Not everyone wanted state rules that favored public access to the river, bluff protections and scenic views over unmitigated development. In 2011, an attempt to repeal the bipartisan reform bill arose. FMR — in concert with other organizations and advocates — managed to defend it with the help of then-Gov. Mark Dayton’s veto.

FMR didn’t advocate for the blanket standards that some opponents imagined. Whitney remembers sessions poring over GIS maps projected on a screen, figuring out how the rules might account for unique geography and existing development. FMR proposed distinguishing more districts, each with its own standards. That way state rules could be tailored differently for downtown St. Paul versus a neighborhood in Brooklyn Park.

These tailored state rules could guard against towering, sore-thumb developments in places like the river gorge. Building height limits, plus open space and vegetation management requirements, would allow the ribbons of green along the shorelines to run uninterrupted, the feeling of immersion in the more-than-human world preserved and accessible.

Persistence pays off

Finally, in 2017, the Legislature passed the DNR’s cohesive, protective development rules for the 72-mile stretch of our metro Mississippi River. Reflected in the package were many measures FMR had championed. Whitney is

proud of the result: “These stronger protections wouldn’t have happened without FMR and our supporters.” Since then, FMR has helped 24 of the 25 critical area cities and townships fold the rules into their plans and adopt official ordinances. Only St. Paul is left (see below).

Nearly two decades of regulation reform may not be what many have in mind when they envision change-making. But Land Use & Planning Director Colleen O’Connor Toberman notes, “There’s real power in an organization that understands the process and the law, gets into the details and has the consistency to stick with it for 20 years.”

The development we won’t see

Ultimately, the impact of critical area reform will be in what we see less of along the river: bluff erosion, clear-cut shorelines, outsized new development without public access, sky-high buildings disrupting natural views.

We won’t even see the start of such projects. Those steel pilings from 1968 remain. Now, they’re relics from the era that sparked this effort, a reminder that this type of out-of-place development is a thing of the past.



The only city without updated river rules?

Despite an original state deadline of January 2021, St. Paul has yet to adopt its ordinance. But there’s hope on the horizon. After extensive advocacy from FMR and local residents, the city is indicating potential adoption by late 2025. If you live in St. Paul, join us for a meeting with the mayor Oct. 15.

Learn more at fmr.org/MRCCA-2025



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Protect our river's future — Help us reach the finish line

Thanks to you, we've raised \$5 million for the Our River Campaign together, and now we're setting our sights even higher.

This incredible milestone reflects the generosity, passion and commitment of our donors who believe in a healthier, more resilient Mississippi River. Because of your support, we're restoring riverfront habitat, protecting clean water and creating more opportunities for people to connect with the river we depend on. But our work is far from finished. The challenges facing the river continue to grow.

That's why we've set a **stretch goal of \$1,000,000** more by Dec. 31, 2025. With your continued support, we can finish strong and do even more to safeguard the river we love.



Keep it going:
fmr.org/our-river

