In Wisconsin we are lucky to have vast water resources. Many states don’t have what we do. However, our water resources are vulnerable. Our current methods to protect our water from pollution and greed are failing. People and the environments they live in are suffering.

• More than half a million people in Wisconsin cannot drink their water.
• We face contamination from agricultural runoff, lead, and PFAS “forever chemicals.”
• Lakes and streams are shrinking because of over pumping.
• Many water bodies are choked with algal blooms.
• We face new threats from toxic mining pollution.
• Flooding continues to devastate Wisconsin communities and businesses.

Our state’s water challenges will continue unless we can find a better way to safeguard our water. We must create a better system.

If we want to protect our health and economy we need a better way to manage our water resources. The Wisconsin Water Agenda is a path to clean water for all, a healthy environment and a vibrant economy.

A New Path:
What does a new system look like that can achieve our vision of clean water for all?
River Alliance of Wisconsin has developed the Wisconsin Water Agenda, which lays out the 12 elements needed to achieve clean water in Wisconsin. We have done this by working with a diverse team of individuals from around the state. This team was selected based on their experience, expertise, and background in water issues and management. This work builds off of current laws, as well as numerous other efforts from Wisconsin and elsewhere.
1. Embrace a single, statewide goal.
Our water resources are affected by many entities, each with its own goals. We need one overarching goal that drives the entire system.

2. Strengthen our statewide value for water.
Clean and abundant water is part of our identity as Wisconsinites. We must take pride in it and value it. A new system will only succeed if we can highlight our state’s heritage and traditions around water. A new system can also create new traditions and rituals around water as needed.

3. Engage ALL stakeholders and be inclusive.
For too long certain groups of people have been left out of decision-making processes when it comes to water, especially Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). In a new system, decision making must be collective and require effective engagement of all stakeholders. A new system must be inclusive, equitable, fair, and comprehensive.

4. Manage water as it exists in nature.
All water is connected, and what we do on the land affects our waters. Nature does not distinguish between surface water and groundwater, for example, but our current systems do. A new system should be structured around the water cycle and its limits for a given area. A new system must also consider cumulative impacts, not just individual acts in isolation.

5. Prevent threats to people, plants and wildlife.
Our current system treats chemicals, such as PFAS as “innocent until proven guilty.” Substances can be created and used for decades until harm is discovered. In a new system we must require that industry test substances before they enter into commerce to ensure that they are not harmful to living beings or ecosystems. Potential harm should be avoided, not just minimized or mitigated.

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6. Connect benefits and harm.
In too many instances, a few entities make a profit, while the public bears the risk and harm. Sulfide mining is an example. A new system must allow the public to consider the benefits and risks of an activity that influences water resources.

7. Emphasize education about water for all ages.
As Wisconsinites, we deserve to know more about our water resources. A new system will incorporate education (in school and beyond) about the water cycle, the history of water use in Wisconsin, the cultural significance of water, and the health benefits of access to water.

8. Focus on the causes of an issue, not the symptoms.
When it comes to water issues, quick fixes are not sustainable. For example, providing filters or bottled water for those with contaminated wells does nothing to fix the root cause of the problem. A new system must invest in fixing the root causes.

9. Regenerate and restore.
We have come to accept practices that damage our water supply, health, and environment. We can no longer continue this approach and maintain our quality of life and economy. A new system must rebuild and restore our natural systems.

10. Be sufficiently funded.
A new system will require sufficient, sustained resources. These resources must be protected from the whims of politicians.

11. Adapt and be flexible.
A “one and done” system is not adequate over time. Our current system takes far too long to adapt as new knowledge and issues emerge. A new system must be able to adapt quickly to prevent damage and expense.

12. Generate knowledge to solve problems.
A successful system must evaluate what we don’t know and look ahead. Building on the Wisconsin Idea—that research should be used to improve health, benefit the public, and solve problems—a new system will require that we generate and share new information with stakeholders. This will allow us to make informed decisions for our waters and communities.

Get Involved: If these goals inspire you, we invite you to join us on the path to clean water in Wisconsin. We will make the next steps clear and easy, and we welcome your input! Sign up now for updates on the Wisconsin Water Agenda.
wisconsinrivers.org/newsletter-signup
About the Core Team

The Wisconsin Water Agenda was informed by the robust deliberations of our Core Team, a diverse group of individuals from around the state with wide-ranging experience and expertise on water issues and social change.

Members of the Wisconsin Water Agenda Core Team include:

- **Gary Besaw** | Former Tribal Chair, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin
- **Sam Breidenbach** | President, TDS Custom Construction
- **Brenda Coley** | Co-Executive Director, Milwaukee Water Commons
- **Sharon Dunwoody** | Professor emerita, Journalism and Mass Communication, UW-Madison
- **Jane Elder** | Executive Director, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters
- **Kevin Fermanich** | Professor in the Geoscience Department, UW-Green Bay
- **Dave Fowler** | Senior Project Manager, Assoc. of State Floodplain Managers; former staff at Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, River Alliance board
- **Kathy Lake** | Manager of Pollution Prevention Program, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District
- **Kriss Marion** | Circle M Market Farm
- **Bob Martini** | Wisconsin’s Green Fire, former WI DNR staff
- **Richard Monette** | Professor of Law at University of Wisconsin Law School; Director, Great Lakes Indian Law Center
- **Mary Ellen Vollbrecht** | River Alliance board Chair, former WI DNR staff

The Wisconsin Water Agenda also builds upon previous work that has been done in our region, including the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, Waters of Wisconsin; the Future of Farming, Shifting Currents, and Food, Land and Water; and others.