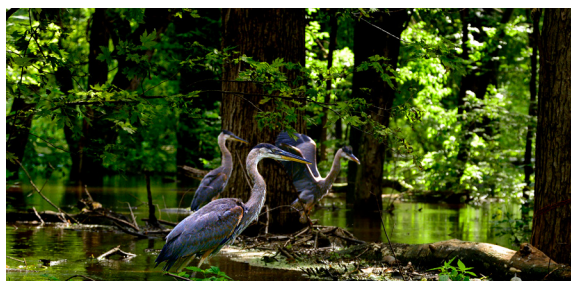




MISSISSIPPI RIVER WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP



RIVER CONNECTIONS WORKSHOP

SUMMARY REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS AND ACTIONS

NEW ORLEANS, LA

MAY 2026

MAY 2026
SUMMARY
REPORT OF
WORKSHOP
PROCEEDINGS
AND ACTIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Mississippi River watershed sustains communities across 31 states and two Canadian provinces. The river provides drinking water for 20 million Americans, powers a significant portion of the nation's economy and sustains vital ecosystems. Yet declining water quality, more frequent floods and droughts, aging infrastructure and habitat loss threaten the long-term health and resilience of the watershed. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across the entire landscape.

The Mississippi River Watershed Partnership (the Partnership) is working to build a diverse coalition of federal and state agencies, Tribes, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and representatives from industry, academia and local communities to advance watershed-wide solutions. The River Connections workshop brought together approximately 240 participants from across the watershed to identify opportunities to better connect science with implementation while advancing the Partnership's priorities and organizational structure.

A central theme throughout the workshop was the need for greater coordination of science across the watershed. Participants emphasized that decision makers often lack access to the consistent, long-term, watershed-scale information they need to guide funding decisions and on-the-ground actions. They identified a strong need for:

- Standardized monitoring systems,
- Shared data protocols,
- Centralized data repositories, and
- Improved mechanisms for translating scientific findings into practical actions and policy decisions.

Participants also highlighted the importance of science communication. Along with strong science, it's important to have compelling narratives that demonstrate economic benefits for conservation, quantify the costs of inaction, and resonate with policymakers and local communities. Greater engagement with social scientists, economists, communication professionals and community leaders is critical for translating technical information into actionable knowledge and building public support for watershed investments.

The workshop advanced several roadmaps—implementation plans that identify priority actions, key partners and opportunities to advance the Partnership's goals and actions—across the Partnership's five focus areas: fish and wildlife, floods and droughts, inland navigation, recreation and water quality. It also developed cross-cutting policy and communications strategies. Participants reviewed prioritized roadmap actions, identified opportunities for collaboration and made recommendations for next steps.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (CONT.)

Several overarching themes emerged across all roadmap discussions. Participants emphasized the value of:

- Leveraging and connecting existing programs rather than duplicating efforts,
- Stronger coordination among agencies, researchers, practitioners and funding organizations,
- Better use of existing datasets, and
- Increased focus on measurable outcomes and long-term monitoring.

The Partnership was considered to be uniquely positioned to serve as a watershed-wide convener that can align priorities, facilitate collaboration and identify shared goals.

Workshop leaders introduced a new leadership structure for the Mississippi River Watershed Partnership, including a Leadership Council, a Federal Agency Network, and Technical and Strategy committees. Participants explored ideas for future committees as the Partnership continues to grow.

Looking ahead, the Partnership continues to pursue a long-term vision for a federally supported Mississippi River Watershed Program. This future program would build upon existing watershed initiatives while providing the funding and coordination needed to address issues at a watershed scale. The proposed framework would engage federal and state agencies, Tribal Nations, academia, industry, NGOs and local communities in shared decision making and collective action.



Following the workshop, Partnership priorities include launching committees, expanding outreach to federal and state leaders, refining watershed roadmaps, strengthening communications and stakeholder engagement, advancing Tribal engagement efforts and continuing to build momentum toward a coordinated watershed program. Together, these actions represent a significant step toward achieving a healthier, more resilient Mississippi River watershed through collaboration, science-based decision-making and sustained investment.



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INTRODUCTION

The Mississippi River watershed is a lifeline for millions of Americans, covering 41% of the continental United States. Every action in the watershed has consequences, shaping the well-being of people, communities and economies, and unhealthy conditions within the watershed have far-reaching implications.



Pollutants within the Mississippi River watershed threaten drinking water for 20 million people. Floods and droughts are happening more frequently. Deteriorating infrastructure compromises efficient and safe navigation. These problems take a toll every day, and without a shared effort to improve conditions at scale, the challenges will become insurmountable.

The Partnership was created to advance this shared effort. We know that watersheds are complex systems, and changes made in one part of the watershed affect the rest of the system. This is why a collaborative, watershed-wide approach is needed.

The goal of the Partnership is to build a diverse and robust coalition toward whole-watershed solutions. Building on existing initiatives, this coalition will act with a unified voice to generate broad support and dedicated funding to catalyze action and improve the health of

the Mississippi River watershed. By convening partners across all sectors, we can amplify our collective impact. This summary report presents a synthesis of all written input received through the engagement methods described below.

WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS AND OBJECTIVES

The 2026 River Connections workshop was designed to understand the gaps between science and implementation and identify opportunities to collaborate. Participants also learned about a new leadership structure for the Partnership and developed next steps for the first set of roadmaps, which address issues across the five focus areas: fish and wildlife, floods and droughts, inland navigation, recreation and water quality.

- 240 participants registered from 29 states across the continental United States. Participants represented federal and state agencies, universities, industry and NGOs.
- The workshop was preceded by a day of science presentations, organized by Tulane University as the annual Lower Mississippi River Science Symposium. The symposium set the stage for a robust discussion during the workshop about how researchers and resource managers can more effectively translate science to on-the-ground projects.
- A panel of resource managers from across the watershed discussed some of the most important information gaps they encounter when carrying out their work.
- Three programs in development—the Sentinel Monitoring System, the Mississippi River Basin Fisheries Commission and the Partnership—were discussed as opportunities to translate science into practice at a watershed scale, along with information about the most robust science and data system currently operating in the Upper Mississippi River Restoration (UMRR) program.
- The Partnership's [Leadership Council](#) was introduced as a central component of the Partnership's broader [governance structure](#), which also includes federal advisors and committees designed to support coordination and advance Partnership goals.
- Participants reviewed roadmaps and strategies prioritized for action and identified next steps for implementation and champions for the work.
- Small groups explored priorities to be addressed by the new Partnership committees, and participants shared the committees to which they could contribute as the Partnership takes shape.
- Participants learned about the Mississippi River Water Action Collaborative, a new effort aligned to mobilize corporate and private funding. The Collaborative's partnerships will accelerate water stewardship projects across the Mississippi River watershed.

WORKSHOP METHODS

Participants were encouraged to review relevant documents beforehand. During the workshop, they explored the translation of science into decision-making and how to advance the Partnership through panels, presentations and small group discussions. Discussions focused on bridging the research-practice gap within the Partnership's five focus areas. In small groups, participants reviewed existing roadmaps and Partnership strategies and made recommendations for next steps.

Workshop exercises included the following:

1. In small groups, participants identified the most urgent knowledge gaps in each of the five focus areas, explored potential research-resource manager collaborations, discussed the greatest opportunities to fill these gaps within existing programs, and identified key players who can help amplify the importance of science in decision-making.
2. Participants discussed the Partnership structure and the proposed Mississippi River Watershed Program goals in small groups, guided by facilitators. The facilitators recorded notes from their group discussions using Google Forms, all of which are included in Appendix C.
3. Participants rotated through facilitated small-group discussions focused on priority actions the Partnership is advancing, referred to as roadmaps. These discussions helped refine implementation strategies, identify opportunities for collaboration and build on ideas generated by previous groups.
4. At the end of the workshop, leaders shared opportunities for participants to continue engaging in the work, including by joining a committee. Participants indicated their interest in joining one or more committees via a Google Form.

BRIDGING THE RESEARCH-PRACTICE GAP

Multiple recent assessments of science needs across the Mississippi River watershed—including the U.S. Geological Survey's 2024 Mississippi River Science Forum Report, the Mississippi River Watershed Partnership Science Roadmap Working Group (2025) and the Environmental Defense Fund's (EDF's) 2025 Science Strategy—all identified a shared priority: convening researchers, practitioners and resource managers to strengthen collaboration and better connect science with management decisions. In response, the River Connections workshop brought these groups together to identify critical science and information gaps, explore barriers to and opportunities for collaboration, and develop communication strategies for strengthening science coordination across the basin.

The EDF Science Strategy, presented to the Partnership in August 2025, synthesized findings from expert panels, interviews, and surveys to identify the critical elements of successful science-based ecosystem restoration efforts in the Mississippi-Atchafalaya River Basin. The report emphasized that effective ecosystem management depends on sustained collaboration, requires coordinated science, and builds upon the many existing research and monitoring efforts across the watershed. The EDF Science Strategy Report serves as the backbone for the Partnership's efforts to build a watershed-wide science strategy.

PUTTING THE SCIENCE TO WORK

Workshop participants explored how to connect academic researchers with on-the-ground applications and natural resource management decisions. Panels and breakout groups explored these connections from different angles throughout the day, and four key themes emerged.



1. Need for science coordination across the basin

Many of the workshop participants noted that this was the first time they had participated in a watershed-wide forum for exchanging research. People who are working in a particular geography can easily forget how large and interconnected the watershed really is. Learning about the issues from different perspectives is beneficial, and it's clear that science efforts across the basin could be more coordinated while maintaining parity between sub-basins. For example, one suggestion was to replicate the UMRR program for the whole watershed or create a similar program for each sub-basin. Without coordination, it is difficult to prioritize efforts and determine what types of interventions will

work best. Similarly, without having agreed-upon priorities, it is hard to make decisions between interventions that could be in conflict.



2. Need for standardized, continuous, long-term data

There is a clear need for higher resolution data, long-term and continuous monitoring, and central data repositories. One group summarized the knowledge gaps as “information availability gaps” (not knowing what information is available), “process gaps” (between multiple jurisdictions, leading to unclear decision making), and “information use gaps” (unclear who is using existing data and for what purposes/decisions). There was strong support for the Sentinel Monitoring System championed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). That effort seeks to put the appropriate monitoring systems in place to determine whether we are making progress on our goals for the river and to standardize data across the basin. One priority for the short term might be harmonizing/standardizing data and determining where to host it so it can be accessible to everyone. The many different ways to collect and store monitoring data point to the need for science coordination to ensure that all entities are collecting data in the same way and monitoring the same parameters to feed into a central repository.



3. Need to improve science communication

Science communication is vital to advancing the issues we care about in the basin. The discussions emphasized the necessity of linking scientific research to economic value to secure funding and influence policy. For example, the outdoor recreation sector is valued at \$1.2 trillion, but data are often national in scale and too broad for state legislators to act on. More localized, specific data by recreation types would be more effective. We also need to quantify the cost of inaction, that is losses that could happen when ecosystems are not protected (more flooding, less tourism, etc.). There was agreement on the importance of sharing science with stories that emphasize the cost effectiveness of conservation and nature-based solutions. In addition, the social sciences (e.g. economics, political science, demography) were identified as underrepresented fields necessary for translating technical data into actionable community knowledge. Enabling local partners to be messengers and co-developing solutions are important for success in communicating science.



4. Need to establish a recurring Mississippi River watershed conference

As noted earlier, most participants had not attended a watershed-wide forum and appreciated the opportunity to see new perspectives. They expressed a strong desire for a recurring full Mississippi River watershed conference to facilitate better data sharing and cross-sector collaboration. It may be advantageous for future conferences to be led by a few academic institutions throughout the watershed, with coalitions like the Partnership playing a role in planning. Future science meetings should include non-traditional voices, such as social scientists and graphic designers, to help translate complex science for the public and decision-makers and to provide training for academics on how to engage with communities, how to adapt messaging for different audiences, and how to facilitate better public meetings.

Participants identified many existing knowledge gaps that leave science uncoordinated throughout the watershed but also provided many pathways to strengthen science and decision making. During the workshop, groups were split into focus areas, who then identified very specific data that were missing in the knowledge gaps breakout session. The knowledge gap information is compiled by issue area and available in Appendix A.

MOVING THE PARTNERSHIP FORWARD

Participants discussed how to move forward partnership actions on focus areas and strategies through roadmaps.

Identify Habitat and Biota Indicators

Action: Identify habitat and biota that should be monitored as indicators of ecosystem function through the Sentinel Monitoring System.

Focus Area: Fish & Wildlife

Summary: The Sentinel Monitoring System is envisioned as a source of real-time data on water quality, navigation conditions, flood hazards and ecosystem health. A key step in its development is determining which habitats and species can serve as indicators of ecosystem function. Integrating these indicators into the network would support long-term environmental monitoring and provide information needed to guide management decisions.

Key Takeaways:

- There are numerous existing monitoring programs, datasets and conservation initiatives that could help establish basin-wide standards for assessing ecosystem function. A key opportunity is to better integrate, synthesize and leverage existing datasets, including state and federal monitoring data, to support basin-wide assessments and multi-scale analyses.
- Achieving comparable monitoring datasets across states will require coordination around shared protocols, goals, data standards and modeling approaches. The Partnership can play an important convening role to foster this collaboration.

Identify Priority Invasive Species

Action: Identify priority invasive species and support agencies and partners in incorporating this information in their invasive management plans.

Focus Area: Fish & Wildlife

Summary: Invasive species can have significant ecological and economic impacts throughout the Mississippi River watershed. This action aims to identify high-risk invasive species beyond Asian carp, assess gaps in prevention and early detection efforts, improve coordination among organizations, and identify strategies to reduce new introductions through key pathways such as trade and transportation.

Key Takeaways:

- The next step on this action is for the Fish and Wildlife Committee to engage with the Department of the Interior's Invasive Species Coordination Team to understand ongoing efforts and identify opportunities for collaboration. The discussion highlighted the need for a watershed-scale approach to invasive species management.
- The discussion identified two key strategies for invasive species prevention: public education and outreach to reduce the spread of existing invasive species, and horizon scanning to proactively identify and address emerging threats.



[ROADMAP: IDENTIFY HABITAT AND BIOTA THAT SHOULD BE MONITORED AS INDICATORS OF ECOSYSTEM FUNCTION THROUGH THE SENTINEL MONITORING NETWORK](#)



photo: Matthew L. Miller / TNC

[ROADMAP IN PROGRESS](#)

Create a Flood and Drought Management Plan

Action: Create a comprehensive resilience and management plan for flood and drought, and implement it across the watershed. Ensure that this plan considers climate projections, new datasets (such as Atlas 15), and durability of nature-based solutions and conventional infrastructure.

Focus Area: Floods & Droughts

Summary: Floods and droughts affect communities, ecosystems, and economies throughout the Mississippi River Watershed. This action aims to assess the feasibility of developing a watershed-wide flood and drought resilience and management plan, identify key data sources and existing efforts that could support its development, and incorporate climate protections to improve long-term preparedness and adaptation.

Key Takeaways:

- Participants recommended pivoting from a singular “comprehensive plan” to a functional framework, noting that a single, top-down plan is infeasible due to the significant mismatch between local projects and the large, diverse watershed scale, as well as the conflicting mandates of various stakeholders. Instead, the Partnership could develop a framework that provides guidance on helping to identify current and future flood and drought risk and “co-managing” these extremes.
- Participants also suggested engaging states through direct collaboration to identify successful approaches that can be scaled across the watershed while ensuring that flood and drought planning frameworks address state-specific needs and resilience gaps.

Provide Information on Floods and Droughts for At-Risk Communities

Action: Provide at-risk communities with access to information or tools that generate data needed to prepare for floods and droughts.

Focus Area: Floods & Droughts

Summary: Floods and droughts affect communities, ecosystems and regional economies by compromising safety and limiting access to critical resources such as clean water, clean air and other ecosystem benefits. Providing communities with tools and information to anticipate and respond to these events can improve and reduce adverse impacts.

Key Takeaways:

- It is essential to clearly define and identify “at-risk communities” before developing outreach strategies. Existing frameworks and datasets can help prioritize communities based on factors such as flood exposure, economic vulnerability, and access to resources and water. Partnerships with trusted local organizations, Tribal entities, State Extension Service and Sea Grant networks, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and community leaders will be critical for effective engagement.
- While many flood and drought information tools already exist, participants noted that awareness, accessibility and usability remain significant challenges. Future efforts should focus on understanding how communities currently receive and use risk information, identifying communication barriers, and improving delivery of timely, actionable information through trusted channels and targeted outreach.



photo: Kelly Sikkema

ROADMAP IN PROGRESS



photo: David Y. Lee

[ROADMAP: PROVIDE AT-RISK COMMUNITIES WITH ACCESS TO INFORMATION OR TOOLS THAT GENERATE INFORMATION TO PREPARE FOR FLOODS AND DROUGHTS](#)

Gather and Share Data for Cargo Transported on the River

Action: Gather and make publicly available data on the annual tonnage, types and economic value of the commodities transported on the river.

Focus Area: Inland Navigation

Summary: Despite its importance to the nation's economy, the role of the Mississippi River in transporting goods is often overlooked. This effort would collect and share information on the volume, types and economic value of commodities moved through the river each year, helping illustrate its contribution to commerce.

Key Takeaways:

- Improving navigation data will require modernized technology, broad stakeholder involvement and policy support. Participants emphasized that achieving data standardization will require updating how data are collected and managed, leveraging real-time technologies and ensuring that the right partners are involved from the outset.
- Pilot projects could demonstrate the value of standardized, real-time data collection. The current Waterborne Commerce Statistics Center system relies heavily on self-reported data, which may not fully capture current conditions. Participants suggested that the Partnership could support a regional pilot project to test modernized data collection approaches and demonstrate benefits to industry and navigation managers.



[ROADMAP: GATHER AND MAKE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE DATA ON THE ANNUAL TONNAGE, TYPES OF COMMODITIES, AND THEIR ECONOMIC VALUE TRANSPORTED ON THE RIVER](#)

Create an Inventory of Existing Recreational Access and Observation Points

Action: Create an inventory of existing recreational access and observation points, including information about who is using them, and analyze opportunities for strategic increases in access and use.

Focus Area: Recreation

Summary: We need a better understanding of existing recreational opportunities in order to equitably expand access throughout the Mississippi River watershed. By documenting current access points, viewing areas and patterns of river use, this effort would help identify locations that could be developed to serve a broader range of recreational users.

Key Takeaways:

- The challenge is less about collecting recreation access data and more about making existing information usable and identifying gaps. Many state agencies and organizations already maintain geospatial data on recreation access points, public lands and wildlife areas. The opportunity for the Partnership is to support data integration and geospatial analysis to identify gaps in recreation accessibility.
- Expanding recreation opportunities will require both targeted planning and diverse funding partnerships. Identifying recreation access gaps should be informed by user needs, travel behavior and recreation type through geospatial analysis and user engagement. A wide range of funding sources already exists, which could be leveraged to improve access and recreation infrastructure across the watershed.



photo: Mick Haupt

[ROADMAP: CREATE AN INVENTORY OF EXISTING RECREATIONAL ACCESS AND OBSERVATION POINTS, INCLUDING WHO IS USING THEM, AND ANALYZE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRATEGIC INCREASE IN ACCESS AND USE](#)

Conduct Gap Analysis of Water Quality Actions

Action: Conduct a gap analysis to identify where increased investment is needed, using an inventory of actions (e.g., funding, BMP implementation, load reductions) from projects implemented through Natural Resources Conservation Service programs, Clean Water Act-authorized initiatives and other relevant programs.

Focus Area: Water Quality

Summary: This action aims to evaluate where additional resources are required to advance water quality improvements. The objective is to compile an inventory of existing water quality actions (e.g., monitoring, analysis, implementation) across the watershed to identify investment gaps and to evaluate the effectiveness of the existing approaches.

Key Takeaways:

- A meaningful gap analysis must extend beyond monitoring, analysis and implementation activities to also consider regulatory actions, policy frameworks, enforcement, innovation and long-term monitoring needs. It is essential to define clear goals, definitions and analytical frameworks for identifying gaps to ensure that the inventory supports decision making across the watershed.
- While this is a significant undertaking, a coordinated, watershed-wide data inventory organized by action type that can be harmonized across agencies and states can be used to guide future investments. Key challenges include funding, data management, coordination, communication and maintaining long-term monitoring efforts. Opportunities exist to leverage large-scale datasets to improve understanding of nutrient reduction actions and ultimately support more strategic resource allocation.

Ensure Alignment of State Nutrient Reduction Programs

Action: Ensure that state nutrient reduction programs, collectively, are strategically aligned, adequately funded and capable of addressing the full extent of the Gulf hypoxia problem.

Focus Area: Water Quality

Summary: Excess nutrients transported through runoff significantly affect downstream water quality and contribute to the development of hypoxic conditions in the Gulf. While several groups are working to reduce these impacts, their activities are not always coordinated or sufficiently supported. This effort would help align and strengthen these initiatives to more effectively address Gulf hypoxia.

Key Takeaways:

- Participants reinforced the Partnership's value as a watershed-wide convener that can support coordination, information sharing and collaboration across states while acknowledging differences in nutrient reduction strategies, capacities and priorities. Progress depends on alignment around shared goals and leveraging existing state and sub-basin efforts rather than requiring uniform approaches.
- Participants emphasized that advancing a watershed coordination network will require clearer framing of the network's scale, purpose and implementation pathway. Future discussions would benefit from stronger subject matter expertise, practical examples and facilitator resources to help ground conversations and identify realistic next steps.



photo: NOAA

[ROADMAP: CONDUCT A GAP ANALYSIS TO IDENTIFY WHERE INCREASED INVESTMENT IS NEEDED, USING AN INVENTORY OF ACTIONS \(E.G., FUNDING, BMP IMPLEMENTATION, LOAD REDUCTIONS\) FROM PROJECTS IMPLEMENTED THROUGH NRCS PROGRAMS, CLEAN WATER ACT-AUTHORIZED INITIATIVES, AND OTHER RELEVANT PROGRAMS](#)



[ROADMAP: ENSURE THAT STATE NUTRIENT REDUCTION PROGRAMS, COLLECTIVELY, ARE STRATEGICALLY ALIGNED, ADEQUATELY FUNDED, AND CAPABLE OF ADDRESSING THE FULL EXTENT OF THE GULF HYPOXIA PROBLEM](#)

Promote Use of and Develop Metrics for Nature-based Solutions

Action: Promote the use of nature-based solutions across issue areas through policy advocacy and educational materials, while also developing metrics to measure their effectiveness at scale.

Focus Area: Cross-cutting

Summary: Nature-based solutions use ecosystem protection, restoration and sustainable management to address societal needs. Because outcomes often vary by location, these approaches can be challenging to characterize and assess. This effort would improve stakeholder understanding of nature-based solutions and their potential applications within the Mississippi River watershed.

Key Takeaways:

- Participants emphasized the need for more consistent and science-based approaches to evaluating nature-based solutions, including common metrics, clear definitions of scale, improved cost-benefit analyses, and better understanding of long-term outcomes under changing climate conditions, including how “no action” alternatives are understood.
- Participants identified an opportunity for the Partnership to bring together agencies, researchers, NGOs, practitioners and funders to align existing efforts, share data and case studies, identify successful approaches, and promote consistent evaluation frameworks. By serving as a hub for collaboration and knowledge sharing, the Partnership can help build confidence in nature-based solutions, support funding and implementation decisions, and accelerate adoption of practices that provide benefits for flood resilience, habitat restoration, water quality, carbon sequestration and other watershed priorities.

Update and Create Economic Profiles

Action: Update the economic profiles of the upper and lower Mississippi River basins, and create economic profiles of the Missouri, Ohio/Tennessee and Arkansas/Red/White river basins.

Focus Area: Cross-cutting

Summary: Economic assessments completed for the upper and lower Mississippi River basins in 2016 and 2014 demonstrated the significance of these regions to the U.S. economy. This effort would update those analyses and extend similar assessments to the Missouri, Ohio/Tennessee and Arkansas/Red river basins.

Key Takeaways:

- Participants identified several key questions to answer before beginning this work, including:
 - Who is the audience for the profile?
 - How should risks and stressors be accounted for in the analysis (e.g., flood risk impacts individuals’ ability to purchase insurance, which in turn threatens economic stability in the region)?
 - What geography should be included (e.g., one county on either side of the mainstem and major tributaries, or a different geography)?
- Ecosystem services should be included in the profiles, even if only in a limited way to start. Recognizing the full range of economic benefits provided by the watershed is important.

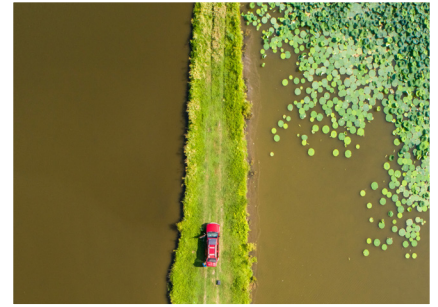


photo: Justin Wilkens

ROADMAP: [PROMOTE THE USE OF NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS ACROSS ISSUE AREAS THROUGH POLICY ADVOCACY AND EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS, WHILE ALSO DEVELOPING METRICS TO MEASURE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS AT SCALE](#)



photo: Josh Hild

ROADMAP: [UPDATE THE ECONOMIC PROFILES OF THE UPPER AND LOWER MS RIVER BASINS, AND CREATE ECONOMIC PROFILES OF THE MISSOURI, OHIO/TENNESSEE, AND ARKANSAS/RED/WHITE RIVER BASINS](#)

Support and Educate Decision Makers on Key Legislation

Action: Support key legislation and appropriations, such as the UMRR, Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program, Ohio River Basin Alliance Restoration Plan, Lower Mississippi River Comprehensive Management Study, Sentinel Monitoring System and Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission.

Focus Area: Cross-cutting

Summary: Many organizations advocate for Mississippi River watershed priorities, but opportunities remain to improve coordination and build support among decision-makers. This action aims to identify how the Partnership can add value to existing advocacy efforts, strengthen information sharing and messaging, and cultivate champions who can advance key watershed initiatives at the state and federal levels.

Key Takeaways:

- Collaborative advocacy is a difficult thing to design, particularly because this is a large watershed and stakeholders include individuals from both governmental and non-governmental entities.
- The Sentinel Monitoring System presents an opportunity for a test case in which the Partnership can facilitate collaborative advocacy, empowering individuals to be advocates while also delineating the role of governmental members as subject-matter experts and not advocates.
- America's Watershed Initiative (AWI) and TNC will develop an initial advocacy strategy for the Sentinel Monitoring System and determine the best opportunities to leverage the collective voices in the Partnership.

Implement a Science Strategy for the Watershed

Action: Develop a science strategy for the watershed and implement it through the Partnership.

Focus Area: Cross-cutting

Summary: The Environmental Defense Fund developed a science strategy report to support ecosystem management decisions in the Mississippi-Atchafalaya River Basin based on expert panels, interviews and surveys. Using the critical elements of a science program established in the report, develop a science strategy for the watershed and implement it throughout the work that the Partnership does.

Key Takeaways:

- Continue convening a Mississippi River watershed research forum, possibly hosted at universities throughout the watershed.
- Explore in future meetings how to better communicate science. Invite socioecological researchers and economists to attend and share their insights into how to quantify and communicate the economic benefits of nature.

COMMUNICATIONS

Keeping partners informed across the basin requires coordination. Suggestions include sending an electronic newsletter with a consistent cadence and format to boost accessibility. Committees could share their updates in real time through a Wiki, which could also provide material for communications staff to include in newsletters. This resource would also provide a repository for photos of on-the-ground projects to support communications plans.

Other communications tools that groups considered:

- An annual report that would summarize accomplishments and provide a basis for presentations to other groups
- A YouTube channel as a public education tool
- Strategic visual communications to increase engagement and adoption



photo: Sasun Bughdaryan

ROADMAP: SUPPORT KEY LEGISLATION AND APPROPRIATIONS SUCH AS UMRR, NESP, ORBA RESTORATION PLAN, LOWER MISSISSIPPI COMP STUDY, SENTINEL MONITORING SYSTEM, MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN FISHERY COMMISSION, ETC.



photo: Justin Wilkens

ROADMAP IN PROGRESS

THE PATHWAY TO A FEDERAL PROGRAM FOR THE WATERSHED

As described in Appendix B, the Partnership has been exploring a federally authorized Mississippi River Watershed Program to provide sustained funding and coordinated governance for the watershed. During the River Connections meeting, participants reviewed both the current Partnership structure and the proposed Program framework, offering feedback through facilitated table discussions.

Participants were broadly supportive of both structures, citing their stakeholder representation, watershed-wide perspective and emphasis on building on existing programs. They also flagged areas that needed clarification—particularly governance, decision-making, committee roles, funding mechanisms, and the distinction between the current Partnership and a future federal program. They encouraged broader sectoral and regional representation along with stronger partner communication.

To maintain momentum, participants called for continued outreach, clearer goals, stronger basin-wide collaboration and documentation of Partnership successes, along with engaging congressional champions to prepare for future authorization opportunities.



photo: Alejandro Barba

The complete, unedited participant responses are provided in Appendix C.

WHAT'S NEXT

Building on the momentum and shared commitment that emerged from the River Connections meeting, the facilitating partners, AWI and TNC, propose the following actions. The Partnership's councils and committees will support this work as it moves forward.

SUMMER 2026

- Finalize Tribal Engagement Plan and secure contractual support for implementation.
- Develop a communications package that succinctly describes:
 - The case for a Mississippi River Watershed Partnership
 - Goals and roadmaps
 - The Partnership organizational structure
 - The process for moving toward a Mississippi River Watershed Program
- Draft a summary document on the Mississippi River Watershed Program.
- Map Congressional members to guide outreach.
- Conduct partner analysis to identify gaps in geography and focus areas.

FALL 2026

- Establish technical and strategy committees.
- Establish Federal Agency Network.
- Conduct Hill visits and outreach to DC leadership of federal agencies.
- Work with state agency leadership to determine timing and approach for governor outreach.
- Plan spring Partnership meeting.
- Finalize Mississippi River Watershed Program proposal and socialize with membership.

WINTER 2027

- Continue roadmap development through committees.
- Conduct outreach to new Congressional offices.
- Begin outreach to selected governors' offices pending state agency partner readiness.

SPRING 2027

- Host Mississippi River Watershed Partnership meeting.

Thank you to all who made this meeting possible, including:

- Environmental Defense Fund
- Tulane University River Coastal Science Program
- Table Facilitators
- Mississippi River Watershed Partnership Leadership Council
- America's Watershed Initiative Board of Directors



APPENDIX A: PARTNERSHIP AND PROGRAM FEEDBACK

[VIEW THE RESPONSES HERE](#)

APPENDIX B: BREAKOUT GROUP IDENTIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE GAPS

[VIEW BREAKOUT GROUP NOTES HERE](#)

PROPOSING A FEDERAL PROGRAM FOR THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER WATERSHED

Across three workshops held in June 2024, January 2025, and August 2025, participants discussed the need for a federal Mississippi River Watershed Program (Program) to provide a framework and sustained funding for work across five collectively defined focus areas. These conversations examined existing programs in the watershed that are important to maintain, the structures of other watershed programs across the United States (federally led, state-led and NGO-led), and the benefits of establishing a comparable program for the Mississippi River watershed. In 2026, a small group of structure and policy experts convened to explore these questions further; the cornerstones of that discussion are outlined below, and a full report from this committee will be circulated to the Partnership once completed.

The overarching goal of the anticipated federal Program is to accelerate and scale solutions across the full Mississippi River watershed, spanning the Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas-Red-White, and Ohio River basins, including restoration, conservation, and flood and infrastructure resilience. Sustained, strategic federal funding would unlock exponential private-sector, state, and local matching investment across this vast watershed. The result would be at-scale efforts to protect the watershed's rivers, wetlands and working lands; reduce nutrient loading and flood risk; sustain the drinking water, agriculture, navigation, recreation and fishing economies that depend on the river system; and ensure a livable, resilient future for the tens of millions of people who call the watershed home.

To generate the funding and continuity needed to achieve this goal, the Program should be led by a federal agency or agencies, and should be organized around the following principles:

- **Governance informed by precedent.** The organizational structure should draw on existing watershed models, of which there are several successful examples, and should be explicitly built upon and connected to existing multi-state and federal programs.
- **Broad representation.** Federal agencies, state governments, NGOs, industry and academia should be represented at various levels of decision-making, along with broad geographic and sectoral representation spanning agriculture, conservation, navigation and recreation.

In summary, the federal Program would:

- Operate within an integrated governance structure, with coordinated advisory support and oversight from state and federal leadership and input from the in-watershed community.
- Direct dedicated federal funding to on-the-ground conservation, watershed and infrastructure projects according to a strategic plan developed and supported by watershed stakeholders and leaders.
- Leverage billions in state, local, private and philanthropic dollars.

Key elements still under development

Building this Program will require answering four foundational questions, which the structure and policy committee is currently examining in depth: (1) authorization and capitalization, how the Program is established and funded; (2) governance, who holds decision-making authority and how; (3) delivery mechanisms, how funds reach on-the-ground projects; and (4) use of funds, what investments the Program prioritizes and how outcomes are measured. Resolving these questions will require the input of decision-makers and experts from watershed states, agricultural, urban and energy sectors, and environmental representatives, shaped into a strategic master plan that guides coordinated investments toward intentional outcomes across the watershed. The committee's full findings will be shared with the Partnership as this work continues.

How the Program differs from the current Partnership

It is important to distinguish the proposed Program from the Mississippi River Watershed Partnership as it exists today. The current Partnership is a voluntary body: it convenes watershed stakeholders and builds consensus, but it has no mechanism to generate substantive funding on its own. The Program would fill that gap, providing the dedicated federal funding stream and a governance authority that the Partnership was never structured to deliver.

As the Program is established, the Partnership's role would evolve rather than disappear. Having laid the groundwork through years of convening and consensus-building, the Partnership would transition into an advocacy and coordination body that supports and champions the Program.