

Fishers & Farmers

PARTNERSHIP

FOR THE UPPER

MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN

STRATEGIC PLAN

Last updated April 2025

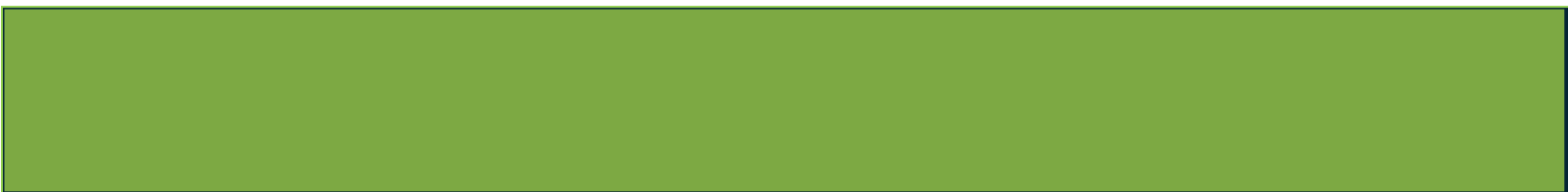


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FISHERS & FARMERS PARTNERSHIP FOR THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Fishers and Farmers Partnership for the Upper Mississippi River Basin (FFP) is a self-directed group open to non-governmental agricultural and conservation organizations, tribal organizations, and state and federal agencies united to add value to farms while protecting, restoring, and enhancing the 30,700 miles of streams and rivers of the Upper Mississippi River Basin (UMRB). The streams and rivers of the UMR provide a full range of cold-, cool-, and warm water habitats and support approximately 200 species of freshwater fish, about 20 percent of North American total.

The UMR is a landscape of 189,000 square miles, two-thirds of which support agriculture. Agriculture in the UMR has achieved unmatched success over the last 150 years in increasing production and spurring regional economic development. This success, however, has come with unintended, negative and local and cumulative consequences to the basin's streams and fishes. Many programs, projects and organizations have attempted to offset these consequences, but the results of these efforts have not accumulated to the scales of the UMR or its major watersheds.

FFP, supported by representatives by producers and conservationists, works to address the relationship between agriculture and streams in the basin.

FFP Fundamental Principles:

These principles allow us to pursue a vision of farmers and conservationists working together in an environment of mutual respect that utilizes and cultures expertise and knowledge of both groups:

- Finding common ground for sustaining agriculture and fishes together.
- Promoting local leadership and providing flexible assistance to conservation projects.
- Collaborating and learning to achieve measurable results at the UMRB scale.

The Four Long-term Goals of FFP are:

- 1. Engage landowners in stream conservation activities.**
- 2. Support fish habitat enhancement, and conservation projects.**
- 3. Continued development of long-term basin-scale strategies.**
- 4. Strengthen FFP for long-term action.**

Specific, short-term, priority objectives, are identified as incremental steps necessary to pursue the long-term goals. This Strategic Plan is a living document and will be updated approximately every 3 years. FFP will also develop new assessment information as needed to support its work.

FFP organization is guided by a charter. FFP operates as a non-governmental organization with a Steering Committee as the decision-making body. Staff functions of the Partnership are carried out by Coordinator/s, Science Assessment and Evaluation Team Lead, Outreach and Marketing Team Lead and ad-hoc work team leads. FFP coordinates extensively with the NFHP, other Fish Habitat Partnerships and organizations that share its vision to pool resources and accelerate achievement of mutual goals.

NATIONAL PROGRAM

The National Fish Habitat Action Plan was born in 2001 when an ad hoc group supported by the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council explored the notion of developing a partnership effort for fish on a scale of what was done for waterfowl in the 1980s through the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Recognizing the decline of fish populations across the United States, and the inadequacies of previous programs to arrest or reverse those declines, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in 2003 endorsed their mission to protect, restore and enhance the nation's fish and aquatic communities through partnerships that foster fish habitat conservation and improve the quality of life for the American people.

In 2006, the National Fish Habitat Action Plan evolved into a science-based, voluntary and non-regulatory strategy, supported by state fish and wildlife agency leaders, federal agencies, non-governmental organizations and private industries. In 2011, the organization changed its name to the National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) <https://fishhabitat.org/>. The 20 Fish Habitat Partnerships are the foundational work units for implementing the Action Plan.

FFP is a formally recognized partnership under the NFHP. This “Vision and Strategic Plan” (revised 2014, 2018, 2021, 2024) was the key support document for the Partnership’s 2009 and 2024 application for official NFHP status. The plan is updated approximately every three years.

National Fish Habitat Partnership Conservation Priorities (2024):

- Conserve water and habitats where all processes and functions are operating within their expected range or natural variation.
- Conserve hydrologic conditions of fish.
- Conserve physical and living habitats and features that support viable and sustainable species and/or populations in impacted or at-risk systems.
- Reconnect fragmented fish habitats.
- Conserve water quality for fish.
- Support the structure and function of fish habitat partnerships.
- Enhance recreational, commercial, subsistence, and traditional fishing opportunities when conducting projects that conserve fish habitat.

The vision, mission, goals and strategies communicated in FFP planning documents support each of the goals of the NFHP. In addition, FFP believes that to effect real and enduring change across the UMRB, actions to improve stream fish habitat must engage farmers and ranchers as active participants. This plan, therefore, includes goals, objectives and strategies that not only target the well-being of fish, but the well-being and prosperity of the primary land stewards within the UMRB.

We understand that although immediate fish habitat and landowner benefits may be achieved, sustained effort over several generations will be necessary to witness the desired changes at the scale of the UMRB. The vision, mission statement, and long-term goals included in the Strategic Plan are expected to endure over that period of time. Objectives and strategies are revised as the partnership evolves.

THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN

The Upper Mississippi River (UMR, Fig. 1) drains approximately 189,000 square miles, including large parts of the states of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. The Upper Mississippi River Basin (UMRB) is blessed with a favorable climate and rich soils, which combine to yield its abundant resources, both agricultural and natural.

The quality of the UMR is intimately tied to the health of its tributary streams. It is the only river system in the U. S. that has been designated as both a nationally significant navigation system and a nationally significant ecosystem.

According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the Mississippi River carried more than 500 million short tons of imports, exports, and domestic freight in 2019. Approximately 20 million people get their drinking water from the UMRB.

The Upper Mississippi River (UMR) region continues to be a popular destination for recreational activities. In recent years, the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge alone has hosted more than 3.7 million annual visits for



Fig. 1. Upper Mississippi River Basin boundary (green), political boundaries, and major rivers.

activities such as hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation. In comparison, Yellowstone National Park attracts millions of visitors each year and in 2022, Yellowstone saw approximately 4.86 million recreational visits.

Streams and Fishes

The basin encompasses 30,700 miles of streams (Fig. 2), offering a diverse array of aquatic habitats including cold-, cool-, and warm-water fish habitats. These waterways feature springs, headwater streams, riffles, rapids, pools, backwaters, side channels, and oxbow lakes. The streams support 200 species of native freshwater fishes (about 20% of the North American total).

The main stem of the UMR alone supports more than 163 species of fish and 41 species of freshwater mussels. The whole Mississippi River has the greatest fish diversity among all of the world's great temperate rivers and even ranks high compared to the world's tropical rivers.

Compared to other large river basins, the historic stream fish assemblages of the UMRB could be characterized as being abundant (in terms of biomass), diverse (in terms of species richness), but lacking many endemic species. The lack of endemic species is attributed to the north-south orientation of the basin, which has allowed movement of species during climate changes, and a relative absence of natural physical barriers to fish movements.

Human activities in the basin have greatly altered its stream fish assemblages. The initial fish assessment conducted under the National Fish Habitat Assessment Plan indicates that most of the basin's Ecological Drainage Units have been impacted to a greater degree than others nationwide. Typical changes observed in the basin's fish assemblages in response to human activities include reductions in the proportions of game species and overall species richness, increases in pollution-tolerant and non-native invasive species, and shortened lifespans of sensitive species.

Agriculture – the dominant land use

Almost two-thirds of the landscape in the basin is in agricultural production (Fig. 3). The nation's corn and soybean "belt" covers a broad portion of the basin, including much of southern Minnesota and Wisconsin, central and eastern Iowa, northern and central Illinois, and northeast Missouri. Farmland cattle density in the basin runs high and is greatest in Wisconsin where more than 1.2-million dairy cattle help this state lead the nation in cheese production. No other landscape in the country produced more hogs in 2022 than the basin where national rankings placed Iowa first, Minnesota second, and Illinois fourth.

According to the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the annual market value of agricultural products in the basin is \$54 billion. At least half of the basin landscape in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Minnesota is cultivated, with only about 10% of the landscape maintained in perennial vegetation, supporting hay production or livestock grazing.

Agriculture has achieved unmatched success in increasing agricultural production and spurring regional economic development over the past 150 years, but with unintended consequences for the basin's stream biodiversity.

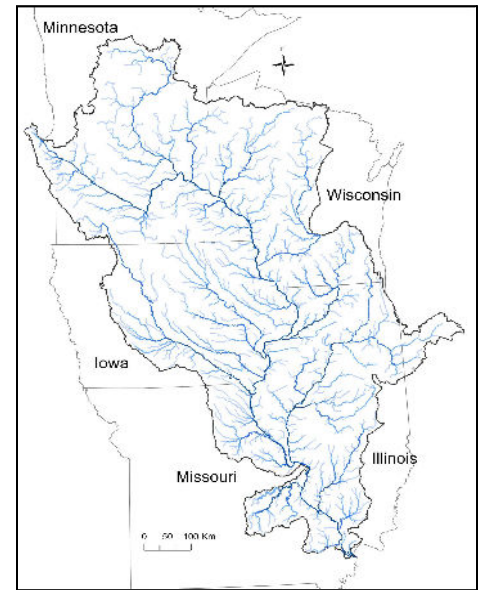


Fig. 2. River network of the UMR.

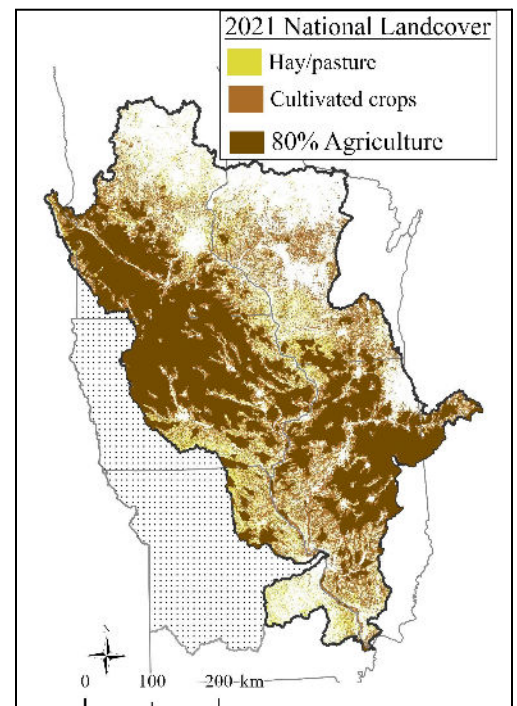


Fig. 3. Hay and pasture (yellow) and cultivated crops (medium brown) dominate the landscape of the UMRB. Dark brown areas indicate where at least 80% of the land is cultivated.

Converting prairie, grassland and forest to cropland or impervious surfaces, and draining wetlands has claimed much of the basin's richest soil for food and feed production. Thousands of miles of streams and ditches have been channelized, straightened, impounded by dams, or altered by culverts or dikes for irrigation, flood control, electricity, water supply, and transportation. These changes have affected the timing and quantity of stream flows in the basin, increased nutrient and sediment loads, altered and degraded habitats and thermal regimes, destabilized stream channels, and blocked or impeded access of fish to habitats they need for successful growth and reproduction.



A recent study in the basin showed that the majority of small streams and major rivers that drain agricultural landscapes have nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations equal to or greater than national drinking water standards or recommended levels needed to protect aquatic life and prevent excess algal growth. Many rivers and streams in the basin are listed as impaired on state 303(d) lists.

Agriculture in the Upper Mississippi River Basin continues to be a significant contributor to nutrient enrichment of local surface waters and hypoxia in the Gulf of America. The National Water Quality Assessment shows that agricultural runoff is the leading cause of water quality impacts to rivers and streams, the third leading source

for lakes, and the second largest source of impairments to wetlands. About a half million tons of pesticides, 12 million tons of nitrogen, and 4 million tons of phosphorus fertilizer are applied annually to crops in the continental United States. Soil erosion, nutrient loss, bacteria from livestock manure, and pesticides constitute the primary stressors to water quality.

The excess nutrients from fertilizers and manure runoff into waterways, leading to eutrophication and hypoxia. The hypoxic zone in the Gulf of America, often referred to as the "dead zone," remains one of the largest in the world, covering an average of 13,500 square kilometers. The UMRB has been identified as the primary source of the nitrogen loads contributing to this phenomenon.

Efforts to mitigate this issue include improving nutrient management practices, restoring wetlands, and creating buffer zones around agricultural areas. Thus, while basin farmers have attempted to solve rather than create problems, negative impacts have accompanied the positive effects of agriculture.

Past and on-going restoration efforts in the basin

In 1931, the fledgling Soil Erosion Service initiated the nation's first ever watershed projects on Coon Creek in southwestern Wisconsin. For most of the next 70 years the focus of USDA watershed efforts was on flood control and maintenance of agricultural productivity through soil conservation practices. Today there are over 420 Soil and Water Conservation offices in the basin addressing watershed conservation throughout the basin.



*"Water links us to our neighbor in a way more profound than any other"
- John E. Thorson, California Asst. Chief Judge, Water*

In 2003 The Nature Conservancy completed the first ever aquatic biodiversity conservation plan for the basin with support from the McKnight Foundation, EPA, and the assistance of FWS and State DNR staff. The Conservancy and its partners assembled all available aquatic species databases and consulted with experts from across the basin to identify 43 watersheds of Aquatic Biodiversity Significance (ABS). The Conservancy and partners such as the Iowa Soybean Association, Wisconsin Buffer Initiative, and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, have successfully initiated four aquatic conservation platform watersheds in the basin, focused on ABS sites. To date, Conservancy and its partners have invested over \$3 million in these aquatic platform projects. The Conservancy estimates that success in 43 priority watersheds would conserve 100% of stream types and 70% of aquatic biodiversity.

There have been many other efforts to restore or enhance stream and riparian habitats in the basin. A survey sponsored by the National Science Foundation revealed that over 62,000 projects of all kinds, at a cost of \$1.6 billion, were funded in the basin by multiple agencies between 1972 and 2005. Water quality management was the most cited project goal for these projects. The authors of the survey suggested that limited monitoring of river enhancement projects is deterring efficient and broad scale integration of the experiences gained through their implementation.

There have been numerous efforts to restore and enhance stream and riparian habitats in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. Recent initiatives include:

1. **Upper Mississippi River Restoration (UMRR) program:** initiated in 1986, the UMRR is a federal-state program to improve the ecological health of the Mississippi River. <https://umrba.org/upper-mississippi-river-restoration>
2. **The Nature Conservancy - Mississippi River Basin priority landscape:** aims to restore and protect 2 million floodplain acres by 2030. <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/priority-landscapes/mississippi-river-basin/>
3. **USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service: Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative:** this is a federal program to “improve water quality, restore wetlands, and enhance wildlife habitat while ensuring economic viability of agricultural lands”. It was initiated in 2009 and relies on voluntary conservation actions. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/mississippi-river-basin-healthy-watersheds-initiative>

Overall, these efforts reflect ongoing commitments to improving water quality and habitat conditions in the basin. Other goals included in-stream habitat improvement and flow modification. Most projects on non-navigable streams originated from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In 2011, Midwest FHP's Science Advisory Network secured an Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies grant, to perform a Midwest FHP/FFP Fish Habitat Assessment with Down-stream Strategies. Independent fish habitat assessments were completed with Midwest FHPs including: the Driftless Area Restoration Effort, FFP, Great Lakes Basin FHP, Midwest Glacial Lakes, and Ohio River Basin FHP. In addition, the Great Plains FHP and Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership contributed and received information from the Midwest assessment completed in 2012. Regional products of the fish habitat assessment include map books, geodatabases, and reports. Geospatial assessments are scalable from local (lake/stream reach), to watershed (catchment), to regional (FHP study area/ Midwest FHPs boundary extent), to national, and are designed to flow into the National FHP's Science; Data Committee's Initial Assessment for the Status of Fish Habitat for NFHP. More than 75 partnering organizations contributed to the NFHP and the continuation of their national assessment, (ecosystems.usgs.gov/fish-habitat/).

FFP Science Team created state map books so conservationists can see results at an even smaller scale. Other maps created include Farmer-Led Groups, Leased Farmland, Stream Habitat Conditions, Land Cover, Erodibility.

The FFP assessment found that the most influential anthropogenic stressors for smallmouth bass habitat includes, percent of the stream corridor that has agriculture present, percent of row crop cover, cattle density, and percent pasture cover.

RE-THINKING HOW TO ADDRESS AGRICULTURE, STREAMS AND FISHES

Our approach to restoring streams in the basin considers the needs of landowners and the requirements of stream ecosystems as equally important elements in the development of sustainable land management practices that enhance local and downstream habitats. Throughout its history, the agriculture industry has been very successful in meeting its goals to provide ample food for a growing world population and generate viable livelihoods in the region.

Farmers have a history of applying individual creativity and initiative, firsthand familiarity with the natural resources they steward, new information from scientists and technical experts, and new tools of technology to solve problems. Agricultural producers in the Midwest have succeeded in developing productive, economically efficient farming systems operating on narrow margins. Therefore, we believe that a workable and sustainable approach to restoring aquatic habitat and species richness in the basin must engage farmers in both leadership and implementation, applying their land-management and problem-solving expertise to achieving aquatic resource goals.

Since operational changes involving new conservation practices can be complex to implement and often pose substantial financial risk to owners or operators, government agencies, policies, and funding initiatives have been created to help farmers achieve conservation management goals. The dramatic reduction in soil erosion in the last century was an example of what can be achieved with public resources and private commitment.



Restoration of streams and rivers in the basin requires a landscape approach that recognizes the uniqueness and complexity of each sub-watershed, and that identifies a suite of complementary solutions targeted to local conditions. Scattershot efforts by individual farmers employing even the most effective nutrient management, tillage, or drainage water treatment practices cannot be expected to achieve long-term, measurable results in local or downstream waters. Yet, most public investment is put toward such individual efforts.

Adding aquatic habitat to the management goals of individual farmers will bring farmers' ingenuity, creativity, and expertise in resource management to bear on achieving farm- and watershed-scale aquatic habitat restoration. Applying public and private funding resources to work with organized groups of farmers and other stakeholders, will help target solutions to optimize their effectiveness and prompt the spread of innovative solutions through coordinated communication channels.

Bringing basin farmers together with private and public stream experts and advocates will help foster solutions that are agronomically, economically, and environmentally sustainable.

PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

The following basic principles underpin the FFP approach:

Common Ground: Actions That Sustain Agriculture and Fishes

Our strategies are designed to achieve goals and objectives that recognize and support the economic and social benefits farmers bring to the basin, and to engage them in managing private lands to benefit fishes and their habitats. One important benefit to taking this approach is that it attracts additional landowners to FFP and its vision, a vital step to finding the resources needed for long-term success.

Local Leadership and Flexible Assistance

FFP primarily implements its strategies through projects at the local scale. At this scale farmers and ranchers lead conservation projects. Their work depends on the land and they understand what solutions may be mutually beneficial. Landowner leadership is critical to maximizing the likelihood of project success at the basin-scale and in the long-term. FFP's role relative to individual projects is to coordinate a delivery system that:

- provides technical assistance and helps landowners identify practices that are most likely to improve local fish communities,
- provides guidance and assistance related to monitoring project results,
- helps steer landowners to sources of restoration funds, and
- minimizes bureaucratic hurdles that keep landowners from implementing projects.

Collaboration and Learning at New Scales

Although local projects are emphasized by FFP, we are committed to being able to measure success at watershed and basin scales, thus contributing to solutions along the large rivers of the basin and outside of the FFP area (such as the lower Mississippi River and the Gulf of America). Downstream benefits will accumulate as projects are implemented using long-term strategies designed to target critical streams.

However, FFP cannot achieve basin-level goals alone. An un-paralleled level of collaboration with existing state agencies (e.g. fisheries and agriculture), non-governmental organizations, and watershed groups is required. This includes working with scientific institutions that have the expertise to show how local stream flow and water quality improvements can be designed to yield downstream benefits. Institutions with expertise in communication and marketing will be engaged to help FFP share its lessons and successes with others.

Last, FFP actively works with other FHPs to share knowledge, adapt strategies, and more-rapidly achieve the goals of the national program.

THE FISHERS AND FARMERS PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

Like other National FHPs, the FFP is intended to help the National Fish Habitat Partnership achieve its goals of protecting, restoring, and enhancing the nation's fisheries resources. However, the FFP is unique in that it places these goals within a broader context which requires more than a conservation perspective. The FFP approach acknowledges that humans and nature must work toward existing together in harmony. In the UMRB, FFP pursues goals and objectives that benefit fish, stream ecosystem health, and rural landowners.

VISION, MISSION, GOALS AND PRIORITIES

Vision

FFP's vision of the future is one in which landowners work together with conservationists and scientists to address the needs of local streams, their own farms, and the fishes of the basin. Lessons learned are shared with neighbors, participating organizations, and others outside of the basin. Fish populations and habitats are monitored at project sites and downstream. FFP helps landowners showcase successful conservation practices to neighbors and others. With a focus



on mutual respect, dialogue is cultivated between agricultural and environmental organizations throughout the UMRB. This leads to better use of resources, less duplication of effort, and measurable progress toward common goals.

Mission

The mission of FFP is to support locally led conservation projects that add value to farms while restoring aquatic habitat and native fish populations.

Priorities for FFP

- Increase native fish/mussel populations
- Improve instream habitat
- Work with farmers/landowners to protect and maintain healthy aquatic systems or prevent further degradation
- Increase landowner engagement/farmer-led committees that drive conservation
- Reduce sedimentation, phosphorus and nitrogen runoff to stream habitats
- Improve floodplain habitat, naturalize flow regimes
- Promote best management practices across the landscape
- Monitor effectiveness of conservation projects, then share our stories through outreach

A MODEL APPROACH: LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION IN THE MERAMEC RIVER BASIN

Since 1993, rural landowners in Missouri have reached personal farm and stream quality goals through locally led projects. Work uniquely reflects landowner objectives and the drainage patterns, soils, geology, hydrology and land use unique to each place.

Local Decision - making Improves Speed and Quality of Work

On the Little Bourbeuse Creek, five landowners, with the help of technical staff from the Missouri Department of Conservation and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, formed a committee to put control and decision-making in the hands of landowners. Funding was provided through partners and a flexible cost-share program. In 2008, this landowner committee became the first group to receive National Fish Habitat Action Plan funds under the sponsorship of the FFP.

Cooperative Planning and Buying Reduces Cost, Increases Participation

Landowner pride and willingness to demonstrate successful practices have made a huge impact. Farm tours attracted neighbors to see and hear what was accomplished. People talked about how to improve their farms. Word spread about how to install erosion control fabric around livestock tanks. Farmers helped each other choose materials and equipment and cooperated to order livestock tanks and pipes at acceptable costs.



Stream bank revitalization project in the Little Bourbeuse Watershed, Missouri

Both local contractors and landowners benefited from completing multiple projects in a small area. Equipment did not have to be moved as far or as often, saving time and money. Contractors helped to spread the word about available funds and project results.

Results showed that landowner-driven projects sell themselves.

"I've seen what happens on one creek over fifty years," said one participant. "Conservation professionals have seen what happens on fifty or one hundred creeks in one year. Why should farmers get involved? Because you can find out what's working without trying it yourself. And that's important, because all of these things cost a lot of money."

PARTNERSHIP GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Meeting the following long-term goals of the Partnership will require sustained effort over several generations. That time frame is mandated by the size and complexity of the agricultural lands within the basin and the current level of available resources. Some of our initial objectives relate more to short-term needs and priorities within a 10-year or shorter time frame.

GOAL 1: Engage Farmers & Landowners

FFP strives to actively engage farmers or ranchers on every project and work to establish a clear identity and awareness of FFP with farmers, ranchers, agricultural organizations, government conservation organizations, conservation related foundations, and corporations with an interest in supporting conservation within the UMRB.

OBJECTIVE 1.1: Establish new farmer - led projects (new watersheds) in the UMRB.

Strategy:

- Use State Wildlife Action Plans, The Nature Conservancy's Aquatic Biodiversity Strategy, the National Resources Conservation Service's Healthy Watersheds Initiative, and other partner plans and assessments to identify initial project opportunities.
- Seek groups that have proactively started local work. Encourage them to submit proposals. Help them design projects and provide guidance on measuring results.

OBJECTIVE 1.2: Identify priority farmer/landowner needs (i.e. profitability, fertility) at the local scale and provide technical and organizational assistance to meet those needs.

Strategy:

- Interview farmers pre- and post-project using e-mail surveys or in-person interviews.
- Utilize lessons learned on each NFHP FFP project, capturing landowner input and sharing with future project landowners and leaders.
- Establish methods for delivery of organizational and technical assistance.
- Support more "conservation consultants" or technicians that work with farmers.
- Introduce conservation tools through Fishers & Farmers Workshops for watershed leaders

OBJECTIVE 1.3: Utilize Fishers & Farmers Partnership Workshops, a formal project of FFP to connect landowners and catalyze or accelerate landowner-led conservation work in important watersheds.

Strategy:

- Seek funding and coordination for annual workshops to connect farmers and watershed leaders through conversations. The funding will be from NFHP and outside grants.

- Activate local leaders, build skills, and coach consistent watershed coordination.
- Help deliver organizational and technical assistance to watershed and farmer-led groups at training workshops, field day events, websites, and webinars.
- Host 1 Fishers & Farmers Workshop each year through 2026 in priority and emerging regions/watersheds including those that have not yet been reached.
- Through the workshops, engage 150 landowners and conservationists.
- An estimated two new watershed groups will be formed and supported through FFP resources.

GOAL 2: Support Fish Habitat Conservation Projects

FFP targets aquatic species of greatest conservation need in important watersheds in the UMRB.

OBJECTIVE 2.1: Work with Partners on instream, riparian or floodplain, and upland habitat, focusing on FFP Priority Fish/Mussel Species.

Strategy:

- Use and revise FFP’s evaluation process as needed to evaluate potential projects.
- Improve instream habitat and promote FFP Monitoring Plan to projects to evaluate biotic responses.
- Look to partners to select priority fish, freshwater mussels based on greatest conservation needs.
- Use State Wildlife Action Plans, The Nature Conservancy’s Aquatic Biodiversity Strategy, National Resources Conservation Service’s Healthy Watersheds Initiative, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Regional Priority or Trust Resources Species Lists, and other partner plans/assessments to identify project opportunities.
- Seek groups that have proactively started local work, encourage them to submit proposals. Help design their projects and provide guidance on measuring results.
- Prioritize projects that buffer fish/mussel populations from climate change impacts.
- Promote small-scale fish passage projects that engage private landowners to improve both the farm and fish habitat.
- Promote recreation on enhanced streams to improve local economy and community participation

Priority Freshwater Fish	Priority Freshwater Mussels
American Brook lamprey	Higgins’ Eye
Blacknose Dace	Pink Mucket
Black Redhorse	Scaleshell
Blackside Darter	Spectaclecase Mussel
Brook Trout	
Brown Trout	
Channel Catfish	
Horneyhead Chub	
Smallmouth Bass	
Southern Redbelly Dace	
Topeka Shiner	

OBJECTIVE 2.2: Work with partners to make meaningful impacts by focusing investments in priority watersheds.

Strategy:

- Use the Midwest FHP Fish Habitat Condition Assessment (App. VII), Climate Change Assessment, State Comprehensive Conservation Plans, National Resources Conservation Service’s Healthy Watersheds Initiative, The Nature Conservancy’s Aquatic Biodiversity Strategy, and other partner plans/assessments to identify priority watersheds and project opportunities.
- Engage groups that have proactively started local work and encourage them to submit proposals. Help them

design projects and provide guidance on measuring results. Prioritize watersheds that show social capacity for watershed-scale conservation.

- Consider priority watersheds in project evaluations.
- Fund 1-2 projects that pair in-stream habitat treatments with upland or edge of field conservation practices in priority watersheds by 2026.
- By 2026, prioritize 1-2 low head dam structures for removal in each state (based on inventory yet to be completed) in collaboration with current aquatic organism barrier inventory work by Trout Unlimited/Driftless Area Restoration Effort, Southeast Aquatic Resource Partnership and others, with consideration of species of greatest conservation need and potential to work with farmers.

GOAL 3: Continue Development of Long-term, Basin Scale Strategies

The basin assessment completed by the Partnership in 2009 and fish habitat assessment completed by Downstream Strategies and the Partnership in 2012 provides information necessary for informed decision making and improving the Strategic Plan. However, several additional steps must be taken to determine what is likely to be the most effective long-term approach to addressing differences among streams, watersheds, and patterns of agricultural impacts across the UMRB.

OBJECTIVE 3.1: Acquire specific additional knowledge of the basin’s streams, fish habitats, and agricultural dynamics to support spatial strategies designed to effect basin improvements most rapidly.

Strategy: :

- Use a consensus-building process to review State wildlife action plans, TNC’s aquatic biodiversity strategy, Forestry Partnership Strategic Plan, & focal areas of NRCS’s Healthy Watershed Initiative.
- Assess roles of relevant environmental and agricultural organizations basin-wide, and use this information to refine the Partnership’s niche.
- Coordinate and compile scientific assessment information on fish habitats and social data and make it readily accessible to partners.
- Utilize adaptive management principles to incorporate assessment results into conservation strategies and projects.
- Share data and science with all partners and coordinate information with the NFHP Board’s Science and Data Committee by adhering to the Board-approved Data Standard Operating Procedures.

Priority Habitats	Focal Watersheds *
Cool Water Streams	Bad Axe River Watershed, WI
Cold Water Streams	Cannon River, MN
Instream/Riparian/Floodplain/Upland	Galena River Watershed, IL
Wetlands	Boone River Watershed, IA
Private Ag-dominated Lands	Kickapoo River, WI
	Peno Creek-Salt River, MO
	Meramec Watershed, MO
	Rock Creek, IA
	Seven Mile Creek, MN
<i>*Projects are not required to overlap with priorities to be eligible for funding</i>	

OBJECTIVE 3.2: Implement Monitoring Plan with each Fishers & Farmers Partnership project across the basin.

Strategy:

- Work with Science Team and Steering Committee state representatives to implement FFP Monitoring Plan.
- Pilot a localized social monitoring project to better understand barriers and facilitating factors for landowner adoption of conservation practices or participation in Fishers & Farmers.

OBJECTIVE 3.3: Use information gained to revise FFP's Strategic Plan.

Strategy:

- Assess FFP's success at meeting each objective listed in the Strategic Plan.
- Refine objectives, review alternative strategies, and prioritize actions.

GOAL 4: Strengthen the Organization for Long-Term Action

FFP will continually need additional resources from both the natural resources and agricultural sectors to achieve its short-term objectives and long-term goals. In addition, the FFP needs to continue to develop effective business practices to operate successfully and build confidence among its Partners and other organizations that can provide future funding.

OBJECTIVE 4.1: Engage farmers and agricultural institutions in the business of the Partnership.

Strategy:

- Seek out individual farmers and agriculture institutions that can help the Partnership meet its objectives and spread information about its value.
- Include a discussion of progress on this objective at Steering Committee meetings.
- Increase agriculture representation and involvement on the steering committee from each of the five states and provide assistance with travel expenses as funding allows.
- Fill critical gaps in SC representation (MO agriculture, tribal communities) by 2026.

OBJECTIVE 4.2: Strengthen ad hoc work teams: Outreach & Marketing, Projects & Priorities, Science & Assessment.

Strategy:

- Identify optimal roles for partners on the Partnership's three permanent work teams.
- Review responsibilities of each team and protocol for meeting, communicating and acting.

OBJECTIVE 4.3: Research and apply for 3-4 funding sources outside of NFHP to accelerate FFP workshops and/or sustain coordination of FFP by 2026.

Strategy:

- Identify potential private funders and review their priorities and application processes.
- Engage key agricultural contacts in outreach to agricultural sponsors and contributors.
- Outside funding should be considered to continuously fund coordination, workshop, science, or other programming needs of FFP.

OBJECTIVE 4.4: Build awareness of FFP's beliefs, intentions, and capabilities with a broad range of communications strategies and tactics.

Strategy:

- Continual review of the Partnership's communications strategy, development of annual work plan, and maintaining communication tools including website, e-news, quarterly newsletters, presentations, image library, sortable contact database, and necessary print materials.
- Identify organizations and key contacts throughout the Basin that can be served by the Partnership or further its mission. Develop an action plan for contacting this list so contacts know how to reach
- Partnership staff and key leaders and how to participate on relevant work groups or committees.
- Establish relationships with media/communications specialists, carry out public relations activities.
- Implement a consistent project reporting protocol and tools.
- Support for local organizing and recruitment and E-updates for landowners and leaders.
- Support funding for effective state farmer-led initiatives in the five states. Encourage program design that includes peer learning experiences and networks for participants, in addition to on-the-ground project funding.

IMPLEMENTATION

FFP operates much like a non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO). This is possible because the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, Habitat for Humanity of the Greater La Crosse Region, and Beyond the Pond Act as the Partnership's fiscal agents, allowing for more flexible funding.

Our partners can directly fund Fishers & Farmers through the [Fishers & Farmers Donation Page](#). Fishers & Farmers will pursue funding from a diverse set of agencies, organizations and foundations, both governmental and private to support the achievement of its objectives. Since some objectives involve coordination, communication, outreach, and education efforts, FFP will seek funding from many more sources that regularly support stream restoration activities.

A great deal of the Partnership's energy will be devoted to providing extensive technical and funding assistance to the local farmer groups selected to sponsor conservation projects. Technical assistance will include making a variety of different types of information, including stream assessments, agricultural practice evaluations, and project monitoring guidance available to farmers. Funding assistance will include identifying sources of funding and coordinating funding requests.

The Partnership will provide guidance, consistent with the requirements of the National Science and Data Team, regarding two categories of monitoring effort. Stream assessment monitoring is needed to provide the context within which conservation projects will be prioritized at large scales. Conservation project monitoring will be intended to document the benefits of projects to local stream habitats and fishes.

MONITORING, EVALUATING AND REPORTING

One of the most pressing needs for every FHP is to determine how to demonstrate success. Monitoring and evaluation of project results will be critical for maintaining the interest and participation of farmers and ranchers, to demonstrate our credibility and value to partner institutions, and to successfully compete for resources. FFP worked with the Iowa Soybean Association to develop a monitoring plan to be used with FFP projects in the UMRB. This project was funded by the Plains and Prairie Potholes Landscape Conservation Cooperative. FFP project leads will work with the FFP Science Team Lead and FFP Coordinator to show progress.

We will evaluate the performance of FFP using a performance evaluation assembled by the NFHP. Needed changes indicated by the performance evaluation will be reflected in updated versions of the Strategic Plan.

Reporting on FFP projects occurs to our partner broader network through newsletters and other outreach communications. We also report to all requests form NFHP and FWS.

REVISIONS

This Strategic plan, originally created in 2009, is updated approximately every three years, and the version year is provided (updated 2025 as of 4/8/25). Annual work plans are prepared to effectively allocate available funds to our objectives.

HOW FARMERS & FISHERS IS ORGANIZED

Who Participates? How Do We Make Decisions?

A charter guides FFP's organization and function. FFP is directed by individuals representing a diverse set of organizations and agencies working to achieve the Partnership's vision. Currently, active Steering Committee members represent State and Federal agencies and non-governmental organizations from both the natural resource and agriculture sectors. The Steering Committee is the decision-making body for FFP and has oversight responsibility for all activities. A Partnership Coordinator and permanent and ad hoc work teams will carry out the essential functions of FFP at the staff level.



Working with Other Fish Habitat Partnerships

The geographic scope of FFP puts it into close contact with seven other FHPs: Reservoir Fisheries Habitat Partnership, Midwest Glacial Lakes Partnership, Great Lakes Basin Fish Habitat Partnership, Ohio River Basin Fish Habitat Partnership, Great Plains Fish Habitat Partnership, Driftless Area Restoration Effort (DARE), and Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership, creating opportunities for collaboration. In particular, the boundaries of DARE (within the UMRB) and its emphasis on streams promote collaboration.

Working with other Organizations

FFP takes advantage of capacity, experience, and knowledge of the extensive stream restoration infrastructure that already exists within the basin. In addition to those on the FFP steering committee and work teams, that infrastructure includes the network of over 420 Soil and Water Conservation Offices, agricultural extension units of land-grant universities, and numerous science institutions.

Science expertise in the fields of stream ecology, landscape ecology, hydrology, water quality, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) is of the highest quality in the UMRB. The U. S. Geological Survey's Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin, includes large river monitoring, ecological modeling, and GIS among its areas of expertise. Four Associate Organizations of FFP; the Center for Watershed Science (Illinois Water Survey); National Great Rivers Research and Education Center; University of Iowa, IHR-Hydrosience and Engineering facility; USDA National Laboratory for Agriculture and the Environment (previously known as the Soil Tilth Laboratory), help FFP understand how agricultural practices affect the basin's streams and fishes, and how benefits of conservation projects can be measured.