



**Plotting a Future Course
on the Mississippi River:
An Assessment of The McKnight Foundation's
Mississippi River Program**

Prepared by

THE
HEADWATERS
GROUP
Philanthropic ServicesSM

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Cover Artwork

Art often expresses what words cannot. We believe in the power of imagery to convey meaning and to inspire action. We support local artists in our work and chose Nick Wroblewski's "Grace of Wild Things" for the cover of this report because it represents the interconnectedness of the McKnight Mississippi River program.

Nick Wroblewski is a Midwest-based printmaker specializing in hand cut wood block prints that celebrate the natural world. To see more of Nick's work, visit www.nickwroblewski.com.

Executive Summary

From its inception, the goal of the McKnight Foundation's (McKnight or Foundation) Mississippi River Program (the Program) has been "to maintain, and where necessary, restore a healthy sustainable environment in the 10-state Mississippi River corridor." In 1997, it refined its priorities with an emphasis on: 1) changing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' (Corps) management of the river; 2) reducing water pollution from the upper Mississippi River states; and 3) focusing its toxic pollutants work only in Louisiana. Starting in 2002, the Program has explicitly framed its strategies around three thematic objectives: water, people, and land (see text box for details). While this framing did not change the thrust of the Program, it did improve the way McKnight communicated its work, both internally and to the grant-seeking community.

Mississippi River Program Objectives and Strategies

1. **Improve water quality** by reducing pollution and encouraging restorative river management. Strategies include:
 - a. Improving enforcement of clean water laws and increasing voluntary pollution reduction.
 - b. Enhancing ecological restoration.
 - c. Providing technical assistance in law, science, and communications to organizations seeking to strengthen water policies.
2. **Strengthen citizen advocacy** by engaging people in experiences on the river. Strategies include:
 - a. Educating citizens in river advocacy and related environmental issues.
 - b. Engaging regional networks that cross geographic and political boundaries.
 - c. Combating pollution in economically disadvantaged communities in the Mississippi Delta region.
 - d. Building the capacity of nonprofit organizations.
3. **Conserve land** to reduce and prevent pollution by encouraging sustainable farming practices. Strategies include:
 - a. Protecting, conserving, and restoring land that improves water quality.
 - b. Increasing adoption of sustainable farming.
 - c. Preventing or reducing the impact of environmentally damaging projects.

To better understand how its contributions have improved the Mississippi River (the river) corridor and whether crops grown for biofuels jeopardize the Program's success, the Foundation asked Headwaters Group Philanthropic Services (Headwaters) to assess the Mississippi River Program from 1999 to 2008. The purpose of looking back over the past decade is to help point the Foundation forward. Headwaters sought to:

- 1) determine which programs and strategies worked or didn't work, and why; and,
- 2) identify potential future opportunities that will most effectively safeguard and improve the river's environmental and human ecosystem.

This was done through research; a survey of grantees; and interviews of 29 grantees, eight other funders, nine experts, and three Foundation Board Members.

Funding

Following are key points of the Program's funding history:

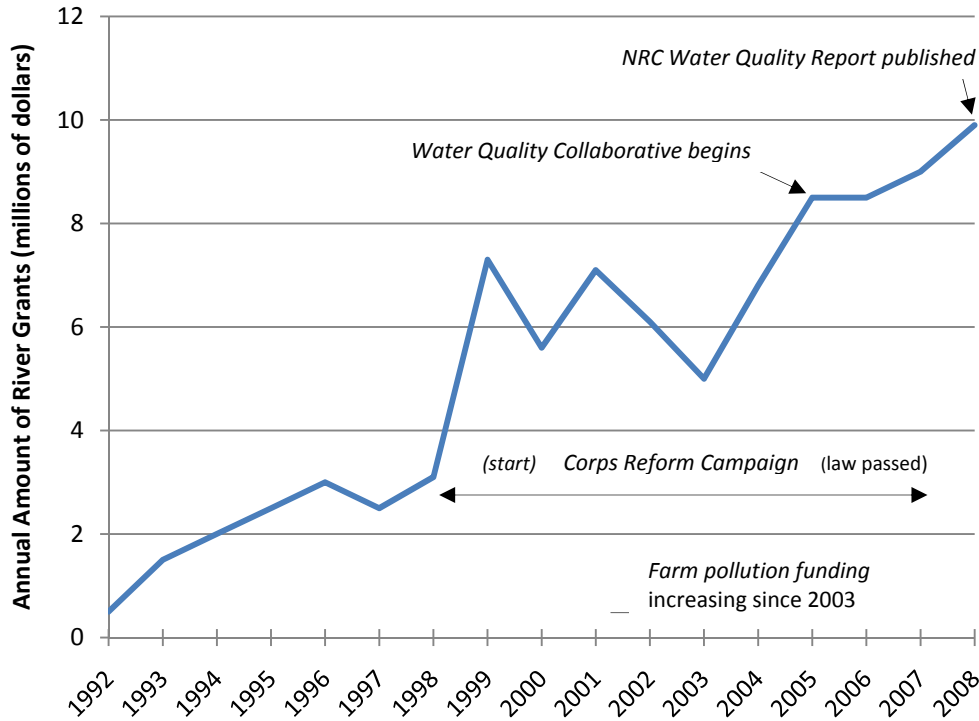
- ◆ During the period of this assessment (1999 to 2008), the Program awarded \$73.8 million, or 83 percent of the Program's total funding of \$88.9 million since 1992.
- ◆ Figure ES-1 charts the history of funding in the Program. Two revealing items about it are:
 - There are three somewhat distinct funding periods: 1) 1992 to 1998 (average of \$2.16 million annually); 1999 to 2004 (annual average of \$6.32 million); and, 3) 2005 to 2008 (annual average of \$8.98 million granted).
 - There were five significant events and milestones, some of which coincide with the three funding periods, and which are discussed more fully in the "Findings and Accomplishments" section:
 - The efforts to reform the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (*Corps Reform Campaign*).
 - Increased funding for farm policy advocacy since 2003 (*Farm pollution funding*).
 - Creation of the Water Quality Collaborative in 2005.
 - 2008 publication of the National Research Council of the National Academies (NRC) report on Mississippi River water quality and the companion User's Guide prepared by McKnight.

What Do We Know: Setting the Context

Current Status of the River

Over the past 150 years, the river and its sub-basin have gone through major changes in landscape, land uses, hydrology, natural processes, buffers, and water flow. Human activities, including drainage of wetlands, agriculture, urbanization, timber harvesting, and construction of locks, dams, and dikes (levees) have fundamentally changed the river's contours and the speed at which it flows. No longer free-flowing, the Mississippi is controlled for half its length by a system of locks and dams that divides the river into a series of pools from Minneapolis to south of St. Louis, followed by a diked, straightened, and deepened river that reaches to the Gulf. As a result, the transport and distribution of water, sediment, and dissolved materials; the effects on migration of fish and other aquatic species; and the river's capacity to remove contaminants naturally across the entire watershed have been significantly altered. The basin's natural ability to absorb polluted runoff, mitigate flooding disasters, provide critical habitat for aquatic and terrestrial species, and serve as a source of clean drinking water has diminished over time.

Figure ES-1. Total Annual Grant Amount for Mississippi River Program: 1992-2008



A few key issues about the river’s health that are of particular importance to McKnight are summarized below:

Wetland Loss

- ◆ Over the past century, 56 percent of the basin’s wetlands have been lost to agriculture, navigation, and levees.
- ◆ The remaining wetlands can store 12 days worth of floodwater versus 60 days when wetlands were fully intact.

Channelization and Changes for Navigation

- ◆ Eighty percent of the river’s length is engineered for navigation with dikes, locks, dams, and pools.¹ These cumulative changes have isolated the river from 90 percent of its floodplain.
- ◆ The 300 foot-wide navigation channel to carry commodities such as corn and soybeans has allowed rapid transport and distribution of water, sediment, and dissolved materials into the Gulf of Mexico.

Poor Water Quality

- ◆ Overloading of nitrogen and phosphorous pollutants and excessive or deficient sediment loads are the primary water quality problems in the river and the Gulf.²

- ◆ About 90 percent of the nitrogen reaching the Gulf comes from diffuse, nonpoint sources — water run-off from farm fields, city streets, etc., or from rain.³
- ◆ Depletion of wetlands, increased land use for agricultural purposes, and channelization of waterways for navigation contribute to these problems. In addition, other contaminants such as toxic chemicals add to poor water quality in the river system.
- ◆ About two-thirds of all pesticides and herbicides used in U.S. agriculture are applied in the Mississippi River Basin.⁴ Seventy-five to 80 percent of pesticides and herbicides applied to agriculture, including atrazine, contain compounds called endocrine disruptors, which are chemicals that alter the function of hormones, thereby potentially affecting an organism’s physical development and fertility.

Dead Zone

- ◆ The “dead zone” (technically called the hypoxic zone due to its decreased levels of oxygen) in the Gulf of Mexico results from the discharge of overly enriched phosphorous and nitrogen-laden runoff from the river into the Gulf.
- ◆ The average size of the dead zone, since 1985 when consistent data began being collected, has been 5,300 square miles. Its average size in the past five years has been 6,400 square miles. In 2008, the dead zone was the second largest it had ever been at 8,000 square miles.

Climate Change

Although the ultimate threats are unclear, climate change and efforts to address climate change could potentially impact the river’s health. Rising sea levels, intensified and more frequent flooding events, abnormal weather patterns, and other natural disasters — all associated with climate change — have the potential to impair the river’s health. Climate change could also negatively impact water supplies for drinking water, agriculture, and other human-related uses.

Biofuels

The issue of expanded biofuel production, especially ethanol, has the potential to increase phosphorous, nitrogen, and sediment loads in the river. Corn-based ethanol production areas can lead to greater soil erosion and higher levels of farm runoff, because they typically require more fertilizer, and as a result, degrade water quality. However, during the past 12 months, the policy environment has radically changed. There is heightened public awareness of the negative impacts of corn production for ethanol and momentum that these must be addressed through policies. With the recent recession and drop in fuel prices, ethanol makers have experienced greatly reduced profit margins with low demands for their fuel and many have closed down.

Federal and State Laws Regulating the River

Several federal and state laws either: 1) directly affect the river's water quality, flow, or surrounding riparian zone; or, 2) indirectly affect its health through influencing the management of agricultural lands along, and in close proximity to, the river.

Key laws include:

- ◆ **Clean Water Act (CWA).** The federal CWA requires states to establish pollution limits for waters within their borders and establish criteria to protect those waters. Responsibility for implementing the CWA is dispersed to the states, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) including its regional offices, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This mixture of authorities is particularly problematic when waters flow through multiple states and inter-agency and inter-state management is lacking. Furthermore, and of critical importance, is the CWA's specific exemption of nonpoint source agricultural pollution from regulation by federal agencies.
- ◆ **Water Resources Development Act (WRDA).** The WRDA provides the Corps with the authority "to construct various projects for improvements to rivers and harbors of the U.S., and for other purposes." It seeks to "provide for the conservation and development of water and related resources," but does not have a track record of balancing conservation and development needs.
- ◆ **The federal Farm Bill,** which is reviewed and revised by Congress every five or six years, is a third critical law that has a significant, and often unrecognized, impact on the river's health. As the leading federal statute on agriculture, the Farm Bill has tremendous influence on land use, crop types, and agricultural conservation practices. The current Farm Bill was passed in 2008; passage of the next bill is likely in 2012 or 2013.

The agencies responsible for implementing these laws have failed to fully implement them, or have failed to effectively coordinate with other agencies that also have direct or indirect river responsibilities. Examples of conflicting or failed agency actions include:

- ◆ **The Farm Bill's conservation compliance program** was established more than 20 years ago in the 1985 Farm bill. The law required that a conservation plan be implemented on lands subject to soil erosion in order for farmers to receive federal crop subsidy payments. Despite the law's initial success in reducing soil loss, its broader success was hampered by lack of enforcement and weak standards for how much erosion prevention the conservation plans needed to achieve. In the 10 states that border the Mississippi River, 33 million of the 123 million cropland acres are eroding unsustainably,⁵ causing sediment and farm chemical pollution to the river.
- ◆ **The USDA and the USEPA** both have responsibility for disbursing funds and overseeing on-the-ground projects that ultimately affect water quality. However, there is little or no coordination as to where the agencies could best target their collective funding to optimize water quality improvements (e.g., which watersheds, and which farms in such watersheds). Additionally, for the most part, there is little if any consultation between state conservationists and state environmental agencies (or their counterparts in USDA and USEPA) as to where to best direct these streams of significant federal funding.

Current Political Climate

The political climate and support for more sustainable, less polluting agricultural practices in the river basin appear favorable for at least the next four years. The Upper Midwest is well represented in key agricultural posts in the Obama administration and Congress. Acknowledging the limits on political activities by private foundations, the current political landscape offers opportunities to inform and work with individuals in influential positions. However, it will not happen without advocates and others working hard to place the river on the national agenda.

Nonprofit Capacity on the River

The capacity of river-focused nonprofit organizations to take advantage of the favorable political climate and to address river issues is more robust today than in 1998. Collectively, groups have greater knowledge of the major issues facing the river, and strategies to address them. Furthermore, they are more collaborative, both across state lines, and between local, state, and national groups.

What Did We Learn: Findings and Accomplishments

McKnight's investment in the river over the past 10 years has yielded and will continue to yield important gains. State and regional level water quality work, the Corps reform efforts, and land protection efforts are evidence of this change. McKnight funding has contributed significantly to the amount of credible information on the river's challenges and potential solutions, increased the capacity of locally focused as well as regionally based groups, and helped create a broader and more sustained presence by important national organizations. Key accomplishments towards the three Program objectives are:

Improving Water Quality

McKnight grantees have been the leaders on a variety of water quality-related accomplishments including:

1. **Significant progress on state water quality policies** has occurred in the past three years with the creation of the McKnight-funded Water Quality Collaborative (WQC).
 - Water quality protections for rivers and streams were upgraded in several states.
 - Development of better policies to ensure adequate protection of streams and rivers means maintaining their health, especially for those streams that are identified as high quality.

What is the Water Quality Collaborative (WQC)?

The WQC is composed of nine state and four legal/technical groups. It formed in 2005 to strengthen individual and collective capacity to improve water quality in the Mississippi River. WQC activities are accomplished through six working groups: nitrogen and phosphorous pollution, permit review and enforcement, farm conservation program, farm regulatory policy, water quality standards & anti-degradation, and communications. These groups are also advised by several regional and national organizations.

2. **The National Research Council report is a major contribution.** Beyond identifying and confirming key issues affecting the health of the river, the NRC report on Mississippi River water quality has provided credible strategies and recommendations for local, state, and federal agencies, along with non-governmental organizations, to implement and improve management schemes and policies.
3. **Major gains in reforming the Army Corps of Engineers.** The 10-plus year efforts of the Corps Reform Network (CRN) and its members have led to some significant victories that will ultimately improve water quality in the river, which include both stopping harmful projects that have been pending for decades and changing how the Corps works. The role of McKnight in the CRN is hard to overstate. Key accomplishments include:
 - Stopping a very expensive, low benefit project on the Yazoo River in the state of Mississippi. Called the Yazoo Pumps project, its defeat protects 200,000 acres of floodplain wetlands from being permanently drained.
 - Defeating the Corps' St. Johns New Madrid Floodway flood control project in southeast Missouri, thus maintaining 75,000 acres of rare and critically important Mississippi River backwater habitat and 36,000 acres of wetlands.

What Is the Corps Reform Network (CRN)?

The CRN involves more than 160 local, state, regional, and national organizations focused on improving how the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages water resources across the country. The CRN's origins are rooted in the McKnight-funded *Troubled Waters* report that was published in 2000 by Taxpayers for Common Sense and the National Wildlife Federation. The report focused on 25 proposed wasteful and damaging projects to demonstrate why the Corps of Engineers needed to be reformed. McKnight's goal has been to change how the Corps manages the Mississippi River, which required building a network of supporters across the country to change how the Corps works nationwide. A "sequel" to the 2000 report was published in 2004, *Crossroads: Congress, The Corps of Engineers and the Future of America's Water Resources*. It described the rationale and principles for reforming the Corps. For the past several years, McKnight awarded a total of nearly \$1 million annually to several organizations for Corps Reform efforts. This culminated in the passage of significant reforms by Congress that became law in 2007 and implementation is pending, but is far from assured.

- Informing and educating lawmakers, their staff and the public about the ways in which the Army Corps of Engineers conducts its Mississippi River work. These efforts contributed to key changes in the federal 2007 Water Resources Development Act, including the following elements:
 - Closure of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), a 66-mile shortcut from the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans built to save time for barges. Its construction in 1965 destroyed 27,000 acres of wetlands, thereby weakening the protection for New Orleans' levees. MRGO also enabled the surge of storm waters from Hurricane Katrina to accelerate inland in 2005. Closure plans for MRGO are underway, with McKnight grantees advocating the best restoration approaches associated with the closure.
 - Establishment of the \$1.7 billion Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP), which is intended over the next 15 years to restore 105,000 acres of habitat and protect 35,000 acres of floodplain habitat along the Upper Mississippi River.
 - Requiring the Corps to restore other wetlands to compensate for those damaged by its own construction projects, revise its outdated project planning principles to give restoration

options higher priority, and enable independent review of its most costly and controversial project proposals.

Conserving Land

4. **McKnight grantees protected nearly 121,000 acres of wetlands and floodplains.** The Foundation's \$10.3 million in grants for saving land helped to prevent future destruction of fragile areas and have helped to conserve, protect, and restore lands that benefit water quality.
5. **Advocacy for policy changes and implementation were the major focus of McKnight grants for more sustainable agriculture.**
 - McKnight's grantees helped educate and inform lawmakers, their staff and the public about ways to improve the conservation provisions in federal farm policy. This contributed to the following changes to the 2008 Federal Farm Bill:
 - The Conservation Title budget increased by \$3.8 billion to \$25 billion over the next five years (2008-2012).
 - More money for programs that support and reward farmers for implementing conservation practices on their working lands including a 10-fold increase for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and a 200 percent increase for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Strengthening Citizen Advocacy

The commitment to this third objective of the River Program and its strategies has contributed to some of the water quality and land-conservation gains reported above. Key thematic results include:

6. **Efforts to educate and inform the public and decision makers are considered important, but their impact is unclear.** Some education efforts are general in nature, attempting to broadly educate and inform the public about the river, others are more targeted including:
 - One grantee recruited 35 to 40 state legislators along the lower river to further their understanding of environmental concerns on the river.
 - The McKnight-supported Mississippi River Communication Network (MRCN) developed a set of communication recommendations for targeting specific audiences about the river and specific strategies to restore the health of the river.
7. **The technical, advocacy, and collaborative capacities of river groups have improved significantly.** The River Program's investment over the past 10 years has contributed to grantees' capacity to undertake advocacy planning, and legislative and administrative advocacy in the policy areas with which they are familiar.
8. **Capacity to address nonpoint source agricultural pollution (nitrogen and phosphorus) is still limited, but growing.**
9. **Investments in general capacity building efforts and targeted third party trainings were important** including:
 - A \$2.1 million investment in three organizations that subsidize organizational development training and strategic planning for grantees seeking such assistance

- Publication of *Defining We in Environmental Advocacy* by ActionMedia, which has been distributed to 7,500 individuals and organizations, including all members of the Environmental Grantmakers Association. Four workshops were conducted as part of the process of writing the booklet.

10. Grantees have increased their capacity through collaboration including several previously mentioned partnerships the WQC, CRN, and, to a lesser degree, the MRCN.

What is the Mississippi River Communications Network (MRCN)?

The MRCN was funded by McKnight in 2005 to coordinate efforts and develop a unifying communications strategy for promoting the ecological work of its more than 35 organizations along the 10-state River corridor. In addition, the network has brought together local, regional, and national organizations to coordinate their respective on-the-ground and on-the-water advocacy efforts. McKnight was crucial in its genesis and has been its sole supporter, providing \$770,000 since 2005.

11. Not all collaborative efforts in past 10 years have been sustained including the McKnight-created Mississippi River Basin Alliance (MRBA), which closed its doors at the end of 2006 after 14 years.

Leveraging Resources and Building Partnerships

Beyond the impact of McKnight’s grantmaking, a fourth issue that we identified was funding from other sources that McKnight’s work informed, and helped bring to the river.

12. More than \$50 million in additional funds have been provided for river-focused efforts from other sources. Sources included national foundations, federal and state agencies, and corporations.

What Do We Recommend: Options

McKnight is in an enviable position in many ways, given the momentum it has helped build for Mississippi River restoration. McKnight has a unique opportunity to have large-scale impact on improving the health of the river by focusing its resources on the key factors influencing the river’s unhealthiness and restoration potential.

We offer the following recommendations as possible options for McKnight to consider. They are informed and influenced by three issues consistently identified by the interviewees, grantees, and the extensive research:

1. Agriculture is the primary source of the river’s number one water pollution problem—nitrogen and phosphorus contamination.
2. The ecosystem provided by the river to ameliorate such pollution problems—wetlands and floodplains—are largely gone or have been severely degraded.
3. The state and federal agencies that could help address the first two issues have: a) often not done enough within their own legal and political jurisdictions; and b) as importantly, failed to sufficiently or effectively coordinate their efforts.

Option 1. Continue Current Program

The current River Program addresses all three of the above key issues to some extent, though the second and third receive the most direct attention. The longer-term benefits of this course are unclear and staying with the current program may ultimately hinder the Foundation's ability to meet its River Program's goal. This is due in part to the fact that McKnight does not currently have a clear or well-articulated strategy to address the issue of farm pollution—the most important problem facing the river's health.

Option 2. Continue Current Program with More Targeted Resources

To increase resources flowing directly to the three key issues, while not making significant changes to the River Program, McKnight could choose to narrow the scope of its work. We have not done, nor were we asked to do, a full analysis of which aspects of the River Program should get dropped to optimize impact on the three issues.

Option 3. Focus on Specific Issues and Threats

To optimize the impact of its finite resources, McKnight needs to consider targeting much of its River Program resources more explicitly on the three core issues:

1. Reduce Farm Pollution

- ◆ **What**—The goal would be to reduce the peak and baseline nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the river to levels established by the *Action Plan for Reducing, Mitigating, and Controlling Hypoxia in the Northern Gulf of Mexico* (and any successor to the Plan). It would focus on reducing the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus leaving farms through multiple strategies that include:
 - Appropriate best management practices to reduce application rates of nitrogen-based fertilizers, improve timing of fertilizer applications and ban applications during certain times of the year (fall and winter), and control soil erosion. This could include moving from two-year crop rotations to three- or four-year rotations.
 - On-farm mitigation measures (such as buffer strips, catchment/treatment areas around tile outfalls, etc.).
 - Market-oriented strategies that can: a) create market incentives for farmers to move away from crops and cropping systems that are high nitrogen and phosphorus polluters to alternative crops and markets; and, b) create disincentives for farmers to over-use agricultural chemicals. Imposing higher fertilizer taxes is an example of such a disincentive.
 - Decreased use of farm land drainage tiles and change in tillage practices to reduce the creation of pollutant-laden water.
- ◆ **Where**—For the most part, this is an Upper River strategy focused on the four key corn producing states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa, and in specific watersheds suffering from high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution from farms.
- ◆ **How**—Such an effort would need to be focused on: 1) policy changes, better implementation and enforcement of the current Farm Bill, CWA, and other federal programs, and significant outreach and advocacy with the state and local offices of federal agricultural agencies—those

agencies that have the most direct day-to-day work with farmers; and, 2) on-the-ground education and enforcement efforts in targeted watersheds.

- ◆ **Who**—Sustainable agriculture groups in the Upper River states are quite strong. However, these groups cannot do it alone. The WQC groups know point source and CWA issues very well. However, as the survey findings show, they are not as well-equipped to address such pollution issues by themselves. A national organization building its advocacy capacity in the Midwest is an important ally in elevating the stature and influence of progressive and realistic ideas about reducing pollution from farming. Additional positive developments in advocacy capacity may be achieved by seeking new partners also.
- ◆ **Challenges**—The prevention parts of this strategy do not have much precedence or acceptance. In some cases, there exists legal authority to promote such preventative measures, though it is rarely exercised. In most cases, however, either the authority does not exist or the means, including the market-based approaches, have never been tested.
- ◆ **Assessing Progress and Strategic Learning**—The ultimate outcome would be a reduced dead zone, and loadings of nitrogen into the Gulf of Mexico (with the timeline and to the levels described in the *Action Plan for Reducing, Mitigating, and Controlling Hypoxia in the Northern Gulf of Mexico*). Other indicators could include:
 - Improved capacity of McKnight grantees to address nonpoint agricultural pollution.
 - Changes in federal farm and CWA policies, implementation and enforcement that are intended to reduce, or will result in reduced amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution running into the river from farms.
 - Improved collaboration between USDA and EPA on reducing agricultural nonpoint pollution.
 - Changes in on-the-ground practices in targeted watersheds, whether in response to regulatory changes or market-based efforts.

2. Restore and Protect Floodplains/Wetlands

- ◆ **What**—The goal of this focused effort would be to protect and restore key floodplains and wetlands along the mainstem of the river. The specific amounts and targets could be drawn from the MRCN's Restoration Plan Targets, which in turn were drawn from other state and federal plans and reports.
- ◆ **Where**—This effort should have a river-long focus. However, particular attention should be paid to: 1) areas on the upper and lower parts of the river where significant potential for wetlands to store and filter water exists either in watersheds that are significant sources of pollution, or along the mainstem of the river where large bottomland riparian or backwaters areas can be reclaimed; and 2) those areas where there is the policy and political opportunity to garner resources and the political will to protect large acreage.
- ◆ **How**—The effort would need to be focused on those agencies implementing the federal and state laws, including WRDA and CWA, which permit or prevent draining and inappropriate floodplain use.
- ◆ **Who**—This issue has strong and capable advocates both along the river and in Washington, D.C.

- ◆ **Challenges**—We do not foresee any challenges of which McKnight and its partners are not already aware.
- ◆ **Assessing Progress and Strategic Learning**—The ultimate outcome would be a reduced dead zone, and loadings of nitrogen into the Gulf of Mexico (with the timeline and to the levels described in the *Action Plan for Reducing, Mitigating, and Controlling Hypoxia in the Northern Gulf of Mexico*). Other objectives and indicators could include:
 - Increase in number of wetlands acres—general and in targeted watersheds.
 - State and federal policies that fully support protection of current wetlands and restoration of those that have been damaged or destroyed.

3. Advocate for Inter-Agency Coordination to Reduce Impediments to Success

- ◆ **What**—In addition to the agency coordination imperatives tied to the two previous issues (farm pollution and wetland protection/restoration), there may be a need for one or more grantees to: 1) monitor if, and how well, the NRC River Report’s recommendations on improved intergovernmental agency coordination are being established, implemented, and sustained in ways that enhance the health of the river; and 2) develop and implement appropriate strategies to address lack of such coordination.
- ◆ **Where**—This effort should take place in all 10 mainstem river states, and should be focused on the appropriate state and federal agencies with jurisdiction in, and across, borders.
- ◆ **How**—The effort would need to focus on federal policies (perhaps laws, but certainly executive branch agency memorandums of understanding and/or presidential executive orders) that create or further enhance such coordination, including public transparency, on-the-ground benchmarks for measuring results, and penalties for insufficient coordination.
- ◆ **Who**—Like the floodplains/wetlands effort, this issue has strong and capable advocates along the river and in Washington, D.C.
- ◆ **Challenges**—The challenges in such an effort are formidable. The number of interagency coordinating efforts in many fields is long; the number of successful ones is short. Fortunately, as the NRC River Report points out, models exist in several of the smaller river and watershed basins.
- ◆ **Assessing Progress and Strategic Learning**—The ultimate outcome would be full and sustained implementation of the NRC River Report’s recommendations.

Another Consideration: Pay Attention to Key Stakeholders

McKnight has been the leading funder of the river. To continue this leadership role, it needs to continue to be inclusive. McKnight should convene diverse stakeholders to discuss the specific targeted efforts identified above. We encourage McKnight to expand and diversify the types of stakeholders at the table to include political advisors, experts from a variety of fields, grantees, and other current and potential funders.

Conclusion

Headwaters concludes that McKnight’s Mississippi River Program has been the leader among funders and a key partner in efforts to improve the health of the river. It has patiently built the capacity of its grantees and networks that have resulted in:

- ◆ Delay and finally dismissal of several very harmful Corps projects that would have drained more than 300,000 acres of wetlands if built.
- ◆ Law passed calling for significant reforms of Corps planning and restoration practices.
- ◆ Closure ordered for the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet that had accelerated coastal erosion in Louisiana and the power of hurricane-driven waves in 2005.
- ◆ Improved state water quality standards, and enforcement of them.
- ◆ Unequivocal evidence from highly regarded national scientific organization of federal and state agency failures to implement the laws, thereby harming the health of the river; significant changes in government programs are recommended.
- ◆ Conservation and protection of over 121,000 acres of land.
- ◆ More than \$50 million leveraged from other sources for Mississippi River restoration activities.

The river’s degradation did not happen overnight, nor will its repair. With a clear and unwavering focus, the Foundation has the opportunity to continue and expand its collaborative leadership and broad vision for the future health of this iconic American river. By doing so, it not only preserves and strengthens a vital artery of this nation; it taps the soul of America. As newsman Charles Kuralt once wrote, “I started out thinking of America as highways and state lines. As I got to know it better, I began to think of it as rivers. Most of what I love about the country is a gift of the rivers. . . . America is a great story, and there is a river on every page of it.” The Mississippi River continues to be one of our country’s greatest stories.

Endnotes

¹ Sydney Horton, “Changing Course,” *Audubon Magazine* Special Issue (May-June 2006): 55.

² *Ibid.*; see generally Confidential Interviewees, interview by Headwaters of grantees, foundations, and experts, February 2009.

³ National Research Council, *Mississippi River Water Quality*, 32, citing (Goolsby et. al. 1999).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵ Environmental Working Group, *Trouble Downstream: Upgrading Conservation Compliance*: 5.