

Media Contact: Adam Burke, River Action. (563) 322-2969 | aburke@riveraction.org

New Report Outlines Steps to ‘Raise the Grade’ For the Upper Mississippi River Basin

DAVENPORT, IA, Dec. 14, 2016—Today results from the 9th Annual Upper Mississippi River Conference, hosted by River Action in Moline on Oct. 13-14, were released in an action agenda report that outlines the key steps to improve the health of the Upper Mississippi River system. The report is based on input received from over 200 people who attended the conference. It identifies priority actions and names stakeholders from multiple sectors to raise the grade of the Upper Mississippi River region. The complete report can be viewed online at www.RiverAction.org/UMRC.

The theme of the conference, “Raise the Grade,” refers to the grade the Upper Mississippi River basin received in the first-ever [Report Card](#) produced by America’s Watershed Initiative—a “C.” The Report Card, which was released in October of 2015, provided grades for the Upper Mississippi River and the four other major basins that make up the larger, 31-state Mississippi River watershed for seven key sectors—flood risk reduction, transportation, ecosystem, the economy, water supply, watershed-wide indicators, and recreation. The complete Report Card can be viewed online at www.AmericasWatershed.org.

The new, post-conference report focuses on solutions that have the greatest potential to support multiple goals, and are reflected in seven key actions: restoring and building resilience in riverine ecosystems, comprehensive planning for flood management; assessing and reducing nutrients from rural and urban sources; increasing awareness of opportunities for hydroelectric power; enhanced recreation; better measuring and tracking conditions ; and, improving infrastructure that supports riverine transportation while also enhancing environmental conditions.

The action agenda calls for fully funding the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Upper Mississippi River Restoration (UMRR) program to improve the ecosystem health of the region. This section of the report also recommends implementation of the USACE Navigation and Environmental Sustainability Program (NESP), which is designed to improve both transportation and environmental conditions in the basin.

The report outlines the need for a comprehensive, proactive watershed management plan that would link floodplain and watershed management to better plan infrastructure, development and natural resource management. By targeting natural floodplains, the report asserts that flood risks can be reduced, water quality improved, and recreational opportunities and wildlife habitats enhanced. Additionally, this section of the action agenda calls for the creation of an integrated flood and flow model of the basin that can help guide its flood risk management moving forward.

To achieve nutrient reduction, the report recommends support for the five states located in the Upper Mississippi basin as they implement strategies to reduce the amount of nutrients that end up in streams and rivers as well as funding to standardize nutrient and water quality monitoring.

And to address agricultural nutrient pollution in the river and help meet the goals established by the EPA's Gulf Hypoxia Task Force, the conference report calls for funding of state and federal conservation programs, including National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCCP), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and private and NGO initiatives that accelerate the implementation of strategies to reduce nutrient pollution.

To raise public awareness for hydropower opportunities and to promote public education of clean energy, Davenport, Iowa non-profit group River Action plans to organize a workshop to bring together stakeholders (including energy utilities, clean energy groups, and dam owners and developers) to evaluate hydropower potential.

The report recommends increasing the awareness of outdoor recreation and the public use of waterways through the creation of a website that inventories and promotes recreational organizations, opportunities and events.

In the report, efforts to better measure and track conditions tied to the Report Card goals include the evaluation of current water quality conditions, the design of a new systemic monitoring structure and increased support for existing programs that monitor water quality. The report specifically calls for existing monitoring programs to participate in data compilation efforts, which will provide baseline data across the region.

To enhance infrastructure that supports river transportation and improves environmental conditions, the report recommends funding be secured for critical infrastructure projects in the basin so that they may be completed as soon as possible. The report specifically mentions the rehabilitation of LaGrange Lock and Dam at Grafton, Illinois, as the most critical infrastructure project in the basin.

Over 200 people provided input for the report, representing 95 organizations ranging from agriculture, manufacturing, energy and navigation to tourism, the environment and flood control.

Dru Buntin, director of the [Upper Mississippi River Basin Association](#), said, "Taken together, these suggestions represent a holistic set of actions that can raise the grades for each of the goals in the Report Card for America's Watershed, which will provide benefits for multiple sectors in the basin."

Kathy Wine, executive director of [River Action](#)—the non-profit organization that hosted the Upper Mississippi River Conference—said, "This report represents the significant achievement of bringing together many different river stakeholders, from barge companies to environmental groups, to share the mission of raising the grade. Together we are stronger, and the river will benefit from this partnership." Wine said the actions outlined in the post-conference report should positively impact the grades in the next revision of the Report Card for America's Watershed, expected in 2020.

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