

# Prairie Flyer



This newsletter only appears three times a year -- in April, August, and December. In addition to our newsletter, we use Facebook and our Alerts Listserv to communicate with members about environmental events and action items. For Facebook, please join the Sierra Club Prairie Group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SierraClubILPrairieGroup/>. For our Alerts List: <http://lists.sierraclub.org/SCRIPTS/WA.EXE?SUBED1=il-prairie-alerts>, where you can subscribe or unsubscribe.

The underlined text are internet links, so you can click on them to bring up the pages referred to. All the main articles in this newsletter are by members of the Executive Committee of the Prairie Group.

## **WE WANT YOU!**

### **Join the Club Political Field Team<sup>1</sup>**

Did you know that the political power of the Sierra Club is the most important activity we offer? True. Today, more than ever, there is a great deal of interest from people who want to make a difference. This is true especially with the current administration doing everything they can to dismantle what the Sierra Club has worked for over the past 125 years. We can be most effective at the local level. That's where the Prairie Group of the Sierra Club comes in.

Now is a great opportunity to do something positive by joining the Political Field Team. The Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club is recruiting now for a strong Political Field Team with the mission to elect candidates who show willingness to protect all citizen's right to clean

air, land, and water. Inclusiveness of all people is a major policy of the Sierra Club which is critical to accomplishing our goals.

This next year in 2018 it is important to elect candidates that work for us, and not for corporate interests. We need to elect as many people as possible who promise to protect us from the destructive policies of the current administration.

As a long-time member of the Political Committee I have seen this volunteer work grow and become more effective in each election cycle. Our power is the number of people we can turn out to campaign and educate voters. We may not have the deep pockets as other interest groups do, but we do have people power!

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<sup>1</sup> Before a Political Field Team really gets to work is only after a candidate has been endorsed by the Sierra Club. The Endorsement Process begins with a confidential questionnaire sent to all candidates running in federal or state elections. The questionnaire asks for the candidate's position on topics important to the Sierra Club. Once a questionnaire is received the Political Committee in the Group (within a candidate's district) schedules interviews with each candidate. The interview team then brings back to the Group Executive Committee a recommendation on whether to endorse a candidate or not back. Recommendations are then forwarded to the Chapter Political Committee and to the state Chapter Executive Committee for approval. Federal or congressional candidates need national Sierra Club approval.

Now is a great time to get active by joining the Political Field Team that is currently forming now. Training for the Political Field Team is being offered here for all downstate members. It will be

Saturday, January 27 at the  
Champaign Public Library from  
10:00 am to 4:00 pm,

The training workshop is free and includes lunch, but reservations are required. The goal is to get 20 volunteers to join this great opportunity. If you are interested, contact me at [a.engebretsen {at} comcast.net](mailto:a.engebretsen@comcast.net). Look for details announced on our alerts list or Facebook.

**Alice Engbretsen**, Political Chair

## Chair's Corner

### Prairie Group and Illinois Chapter Elections

Sierra Club members should have received a ballot in the mail for elections to the (statewide) executive committee of the Illinois Chapter. Happy to note: among the candidates is Jacquelyn Potter, who is also a very active member of our Prairie Group Excom. Our local Prairie Group is also holding its annual elections. If you're a Sierra Club member in our area, you can vote - and you are also welcome to run for a seat on the 7-member Excom.

If you would like to become an active part of this nationally-organized, member-based environmental group, please consider running! We are seeking people with energy and time to work on local environmental issues. This might include political work (see Alice's article in this issue), clean energy advocacy, conservation work, environmental justice, educational events, organizing hikes or workshops or recreational

activities, coordinating environmental work with other groups, and so on.

Excom (Board) members meet typically every other month, are expected to be able to make most meetings and communicate by e-mail at other times, and should expect to participate in some of the group's activities. Board members must be Sierra Club members at the time they begin their term (but don't need to be at the time of nomination). Terms generally last two years.

Nominations are due Friday, December 22nd. Please email us -- [scprairiegrou01 {at} gmail.com](mailto:scprairiegrou01@gmail.com) if you are tempted. Or, come talk with us, perhaps at the Dec. 14th Happy Hour at Pizza M in Urbana.

At least one, possibly two seats on the Board will be uncontested for this election cycle.

Farewell to Nancy Dietrich, who isn't running for re-election this time. She has been on the Prairie Group Excom for less than a year and a half, but her work has made a huge contribution. She organized last year's extremely successful "This Changes Everything" film showing which brought together many groups, held fast to our principles as our group's Clean Power Team representative during the Future Energy Jobs Act negotiations, established our Happy Hour series, and much more, with her hard work, warmth, thoughtfulness, and wisdom. Nancy, take care! We look forward to seeing you around.

Many thanks too to Dick Bishop. He retired from the Prairie Group Excom in 2014 after many years in various Prairie Group roles - as Chair, Political Chair, delegate to the Illinois Chapter, and others - but remained active as the editor of this newsletter and as secretary. He's now looking to pass along those duties as well.

### Some highlights since August

Hope that many of us were able somehow to watch August's solar eclipse!

In September we held a Clean Energy Town Hall involving many groups, pulled together primarily by the wonderful Michael Carpenter, a U of I undergraduate who's been working with Sierra Club as an organizer over the summer. Jackie Potter served as emcee. Speakers included mayors Deb Frank Feinen and Diane Marlin, and State Sen. Scott Bennett (Rep. Carol Ammons was unable to attend). Scott Tess, Urbana's Sustainability Coordinator, described prospects for community-level solar energy supplies, which might be built on otherwise-unusable land. A graduate student explained intricacies of the Future Energy Jobs Act, the state law which passed earlier this year, and which sets out requirements and funding for steadily increasing renewable energy supplies, and for energy efficiency and job training programs, with particular supports for low-income communities and individuals. Scott Allen of Citizens Utility Board described CUB's consumer advocacy work, and the available energy-efficiency programs



(though Ameren, in our area, is making them less available than ComEd does in northern IL). Jack Darin, the Sierra Club Illinois Chapter's executive director summarized the statewide picture. Michael Carpenter spoke on people power, and on the Ready for 100 campaign, calling on cities to transition to being fully

reliant on renewable energy - as some cities around the US have already done.

Several groups had been invited to table, and people from each spoke briefly: Lois Kain of Food and Water Watch; a Ms. Stillwell of Faith in Place; Andrew Rehn of Prairie Rivers Network; J.C. Kibbey of Union of Concerned Scientists; M.J. from Students for Environmental Concerns at the U of I; and Rebecca from iMatter, a youth-led national movement for taking action on climate change. In November, several groups spoke to the Urbana City Council, urging them to take on the charge of making the city energy-independent. Representatives from iMatter (presenting the iMatter Pledge and a draft resolution for the council to adopt), Food and Water Watch (talking about the OFF Fossil Fuels campaign, which sets energy targets much more ambitious than the Clean Power Plan did), and Sierra Club (talking about Ready for 100 recommendations), each presented in turn.

This week, Urbana's Sustainability Advisory Commission began looking at those recommendations -- how they compare with the city's existing Climate Action Plan, and, to see what specific actions they could propose to the Council, and how other stakeholders could

become involved.

Also this season, the Illinois DNR granted the state's first permit for high-volume hydraulic fracturing -- fracking -- to Woolsey Energy for a site in southern Illinois, not far from Shawnee National Forest. Two months later, amid much public protest organized by Food and Water

Watch, Illinois People's Action, Sierra Club and other groups, Woolsey withdrew its application. A legislative hearing on fracking scheduled for mid-November had to be postponed - they had planned to have equal numbers of fracking supporters and opponents testifying, but weren't able to find enough supporters. However, the issue is far from settled. Fracking remains legal, and at least two other companies have expressed interest in fracking in our state.

### Anti-pipeline coalition?

At least three of Illinois' Sierra Club Groups have some interest in a coalition working against oil and gas pipelines. Would any of our readers like to be part of that? We'd be collaborating with the northern-IL-based group SOIL, Save Our Illinois Land. Let us know if so - you can write us at: [scprairiegrou01 {at} gmail.com](mailto:scprairiegrou01@gmail.com)

Stuart Levy, chair.

### Outings and Events

*Drive Electric Week.* This was a big success thanks to the hard work of Scott Greene.



Electric vehicles were displayed and people could take a ride in them!

*Annual Picnic.* Thank you to everyone who came to the picnic at Dick Bishop's house. So much delicious food and excellent company!

Despite moving it to September this year in hopes that it wouldn't be sweltering like it usually is at our picnics... it was close to 100 degrees. Clearly Mother Nature is trying to remind us of the need to combat climate change. 😊

*Camping Out.* Our camping trip at Friends Creek near Decatur was also a lot of fun. We hiked, camped and ate! We lucked out with perfect weather and Stuart brought a telescope so we could see planets. A lovely location if you haven't explored that park yet!

### To Come

*Holiday Happy Hour.* At Pizza M in Urbana on Thursday, Dec 14 from 5:30-7:30. Drop in for some delicious pizza with an excellent selection of wine and beer for purchase. (We'll do that this December, instead of a picture-sharing gathering.)

*New Year's Day.* Come along on a hike at Kickapoo State Park 1/1/2018 Mon 11am **New Year's hike at Kickapoo** recreation area. Meet at Maintenance Bldg. Come along on a hike at Kickapoo State Park near Danville to start the year out in nature!-- near Danville to start the year out in nature! Meet at Maintenance Bldg. Details can be found in the Facebook event.

*Cook and Book.* It is time for another Cook and Book Club. This time we will be making shepherd's pie on Tuesday, Jan 23rd at 5:30. More details on the Facebook event. RSVP is required and space is limited. [rvallenga {at} yahoo.com](mailto:rvallenga@yaho.com) or <https://www.facebook.com/events/1913819212279689/>

We look forward to another year of fun outdoor (and indoor) adventures with you!

Rachel Vellenga, Outings Chair



## Other Upcoming Events

12/16 Sat - *Champaign County Audubon Society's Christmas bird count*. If interested, they say, please contact Helen Parker, [h-parker@illinois.edu](mailto:h-parker@illinois.edu).

1/27/2018 Sat 10am-4pm *Political Field Team training* - Champaign Library - in prep. for helping candidates SC decides to throw its support behind. See Alice's article in this issue.

1/?? *"To The Ends of the Earth" Film*, documentary-- extreme extraction of fossil fuels. Thanks to Lois Kain of Food and Water Watch.

2/2 and after: *U of I Solar Array tours* resume monthly. First Friday tours of their 20-acre solar panel array (on Windsor Rd) in February. You can sign up for a tour:

<https://icap.sustainability.illinois.edu/project/solar-farm>

2/?? *photo meeting featuring Don Davis*. Don is a serious hiker - many times on the Appalachian Trail, recently in Scotland, Kilimanjaro, and others - and we can gather to hear his stories.

3/18/2018 *Bill McKibben, of 350.org*  
UniversityYMCA will bring environmental activist and writer, to speak on March 18th.

## Water as a Human Right <sup>2</sup>

Water is essential for life. Approximately 58%-78% of the human body is water. One can only survive approximately 5-8 days without water. As drought and desertification have increased, it is projected that major conflicts in future years will be over water. In 2010 the United Nations adopted Resolution 64/292

recognizing “the right to safe and clean drinking water as a human right”. Water rights are often thought of in terms of scarcity or quantity. Visions of armed guards patrolling water sources in the Middle East or public shaming during California drought come to mind. Here, the right to water sounds good until one tries to *make good on it* without harming one’s neighbor, and without help from nature. If an area is naturally scarce in water, equitable solutions are few, regardless of what we believe is a “right”. And the idea of artificially shipping or pumping water where it doesn’t naturally occur (e.g. California Water Project) inevitably hastens water scarcity in areas pumped. The most sustainable way to deal with water scarcity is respecting natural limitations and living responsibly within those limits. Although there have been improvements in public use of water (water conservation initiatives and self-enforced water limits), consumption and pollution by industry continues. For example, in California in 2015, the fracking industry used 214 acre-feet of water, equivalent to nearly 70 million gallons. Remember, California has always been a semi-arid state with a history of water disputes, and at that time was in the grip of a multi-year drought.

But what about areas where water seems plentiful? Should we worry about water rights in such areas? After all, such areas can afford to supply a growing population and many industries, right? When looking at rates of usage, one gets a clearer picture of the inflated situation. For example, Pennsylvania and Illinois, both thought “water rich”, have millions of gallons withdrawn daily, and billions yearly, by industry (especially thermoelectric - oil, coal, gas). But proponents argue that the water is returned back to the environment and so no harm done, right? This is the standard

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<sup>2</sup> This article is a revision of one which appeared in the public-l.

logic behind attitudes on industrial scale water use. But something else needs to be considered; that is, water isn't simply used by industry and replenished in the same condition it was removed. It is often tainted by industrial use and that's even when supposed safeguard procedures are in place. So although water scarcity or quantity may seem less a concern in such states, the concerning issue that remains is *water quality*. Just because Illinois is gifted with substantial sources of fresh groundwater doesn't mean we should squander it or allow industrial contamination. Illinois water rights laws include the Water Use Act of 1983 that clarified previous groundwater law, and the federal Safe Drinking Water Act that encompasses the Illinois Groundwater Protection Act that protects groundwater as a natural and public source with special provisions for drinking water wells.

Recently, water rights have come to the forefront in Champaign County due to contamination of our Mahomet Aquifer by Peoples Gas. Peoples Gas owns an underground natural gas storage facility and one of its wells leaked gas into the aquifer. According to Peoples Gas, the leak was discovered when an employee noticed gas on the ground near one of its wells, but it took approximately two weeks before it was sealed. It is unknown how long the leak continued unnoticed or how much gas leaked into the aquifer and surrounding soil during that time. The gas storage underneath the Mahomet Aquifer is an injection well storage. James Spiros of Spiros Law, said the gas was stored in natural formation near Mahomet in a 37-square-mile field about 4,000 feet underground. A quick search on the subject shows that leaks from such injection wells are quite common, mostly due to structural failures (e.g. fractures in surrounding rock). Therefore, the same rule

for pipelines - that it's not a question of if it will burst, but *when* - can be applied to injection well gas storage. Is gas leakage a danger when it contaminates an aquifer? Yes. The natural gas is mostly methane that dissipates from water but collects in enclosed spaces. Risks from contamination include soil damage, explosions, fires, and health risks of asphyxiation, rashes, nausea and nosebleeds. The contaminated water is unusable. It wasn't until April, when a homeowner reached out to the Illinois Department of Public Health, that the state was notified. In recent months, Spiros Law took on the case for several affected residents. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources issued a Notice of Violation to Peoples Gas for months of unregulated venting, to which Peoples Gas responded by proposing disposal by dumping on the ground, a plan deemed unacceptable, and so they installed enormous tanks (aka thousands of gallons) to hold the contaminated water until it can be emptied into the Urbana-Champaign Sanitary District (via permit issued in October). Therefore, the water contaminated with natural gas will go into a cesspool of other chemicals enroute (outgassing and synergistic effects anyone?), processed, and released right back into waterways. Senator Chapin Rose referred the case to the Illinois Attorney General's Office, and Attorney General Lisa Madigan filed suit against Peoples Gas for contamination of Mahomet Aquifer, impacting five residential wells (although recent developments suggest more wells are impacted). Questions have been raised regarding culpability of Peoples Gas on oversight of the wells, handling of the leak, and lack of responsibility toward warning the public and state agencies.

The Mahomet Aquifer supplies over 100 million gallons of water per day to over 850,000 people. It is designated a Sole-Source Aquifer, meaning it supplies at least 50 percent drinking water for its area with no alternative sources if

contaminated. It is a semi-confined aquifer, connected to surface water in specific areas (e.g. Sangamon River) that recharge it. Therefore, not only does the aquifer need protection, but also the waterways that recharge it. Although restoration of Clean Water Act protections for Illinois streams was a good start, there must be stronger restrictions on industry seeking to move or store products (e.g. oil or natural gas) across or underneath aquifers, perhaps an outright ban, as spills and leaks are more a rule rather than an exception. If so many are dependent upon the aquifer and surface waters that recharge it, then how is it the right of the few over the many to over-exploit and pollute? Contamination of water and avoidance of culpability by industrial interests is a direct affront to the basic human right to safe, clean drinking water under UN Resolution, as well as Illinois' own Groundwater Protection Act. Maintaining water quality (preserving what is naturally there), is where water rights law can be wisely applied.

When delving into water rights, there are obvious culprits, and when one sees figures of millions of gallons per day withdrawal and cases of flammable or poisoned water, it is easy to be angry and point fingers, and rightly so. However, we must also temper that by remembering what the driving force is. Demand. Our finger might as well be pointing at ourselves. This does not excuse industry of responsibility, however, but the truth is that real change and preservation of quantity and quality of water sources will only come when we get away from wasteful and pollutive industries, turn toward sustainable clean energy, and learn to live at sustainable levels of consumption within the natural limitations of our land and water sources.

**Jacquelyn Potter**, Prairie Group Excom