



June 21–24, 2019
Cleveland, Ohio



2019 RIVER RALLY IMPACT REPORT



BY THE NUMBERS:

526 registrants from 44 states
23% diverse / people of color and
indigenous (POC+I)
62% women
42% first time attendees
6 awards—83% POC+I
90 learning opportunities/170 speakers

OVERALL IMPACT:

100% gained value
99% grew their knowledge
99% likely to use knowledge
99% made new connections
98% boosted their confidence

HIGH PRAISE:

Keynotes, plenaries, workshops, & awards
Working with farmers & ranchers
Drinking water for all
Resilient cities and communities
Strong leaders, organizations, & coalitions



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

River Rally 2019 commemorated the 50th anniversary of the last time the Cuyahoga River caught fire, our achievements since then, and our path forward from where we stand today.

The event was held in Cleveland, Ohio and was River Network's most diverse and inclusive River Rally to date. We are thankful for the city's warm welcome, giving our audience a sense of place and history through the words of Cleveland's Mayor Jackson, Cordell Stokes, and Bill Zawiski from Ohio EPA. We

are in debt to the 170 speakers who made this year's content come alive through 90 learning opportunities throughout River Rally including keynotes, plenaries, workshops, and field trips; sponsors who made this event possible for every participant; and scholarship funders who helped 202 individuals access the important learning and networking opportunities delivered at River Rally. Finally, we are grateful to water leaders from across the United States and beyond for attending River Rally 2019, as well as our fabulous volunteers and staff.

65 WORKSHOPS in 8 themes (35 with equity, diversity, and inclusion content)

9 FIELD TRIPS to deepen experiences connected to the Cuyahoga River

4 FULL AUDIENCE EXPERIENCES—Welcome, Keynote, Plenary, and Awards

6 "IDEA EXCHANGES" on key issues and the power of our network

6 AWARD RECIPIENTS Speeches by introducer and award recipient

1 MOVIE NIGHT AND FILM SCREENING The River and The Wall

1 OPEN MIC 'VARIETY SHOW' featuring musical and other talents (including puppetry!)

"This is the most inspiring conference I've ever had the opportunity to attend. I have so many new ideas on engaging my community about watershed issues and becoming stewards for the long term. Thank you for this opportunity." –Taylor Brook, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe

"[What] I've learned these four days have changed me forever. My approach has been really altered for the good. I've changed my mind about how I can engage people and difficult conversations. Your gift will ripple 1,000 times over!" –Karen Firehock, Green Infrastructure Center



KEYNOTE: WATER AND DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES

Ms. Keesha Gaskins-Nathan is the director for the Democratic Practice–United States program at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, where she is dedicated to advancing measures and ideas that improve democratic systems and engage democratic culture in the United States to support full and fair democratic and economic opportunity for all residents. A long-time organizer, lobbyist, and trial attorney, her keynote address spoke to the ways water issues permeate our culture. “Clean water is a ‘mom’ issue,” she said. “Every mom wants to know her children have clean water. This crosses economic and racial lines.” Gaskins-Nathan described the ways in which this provides an opportunity for true democratic processes to work at the local level. She also encouraged a thought shift around the term “vulnerable” as a descriptor of communities. “These communities are not vulnerable. They are *targeted*.” Underscoring the community found in Rally, Gaskins-Nathan also emphasized the idea that we cannot do this work alone—every group is essential to getting it done.



PLENARY PANEL: WATER EQUITY, SECURITY, AND CLIMATE RISK—CHANGING EXPECTATIONS OF FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY

Where is change happening to reduce exposure to flood risk, increase climate resilience, and improve access to both clean, safe, affordable drinking water and healthy rivers? Can we guarantee healthy rivers and clean water to everyone? Speakers Kyle Dreyfuss-Wells (Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District), Katherine Baer (River Network), Brenda Coley (Milwaukee Water Commons), and Alicia Smith (Freshwater Future) offered insights on these questions during the first plenary at Rally, moderated by Jalonnie L. White-Newsome (Kresge Foundation). From how to interact with local utilities on their diversity work, to holding elected officials accountable, and making sure individuals are at the table to understand *what* is impacting their lives, the panel was rich with passion and actionable recommendations. “If it’s not equitable in the beginning,” said Smith, “it’s very hard for it to be equitable in the end.”



THE CHANGING FACE OF AGRICULTURE—SOIL HEALTH, WATER SECURITY, AND THE NEXT GENERATION

“No one farms like their father farmed—agriculture is always changing.” Ohio grain farmer Martha Winters and fellow speakers Erin Foster West (National Young Farmers Coalition), Jessica D’Ambrosio (The Nature Conservancy of Ohio), and Nicole Seltzer (River Network) engaged in an in-depth discussion of the current transformation in the US agricultural sector, moderated by Ann Mills (Agua Foundation and former USDA Deputy Under Secretary). With new science related to soil health and a new generation of diverse farmers dedicated to social and environmental justice, the panel discussed strategies for dialogue and interaction with farmers (hint: go to the farms and learn about what they do and why!) and ideas for setting aside old paradigms that pit environmentalists and producers against one another so we can all move forward together. “The number one thing you can do is help young farmers claim their seat at the table,” said Foster West.



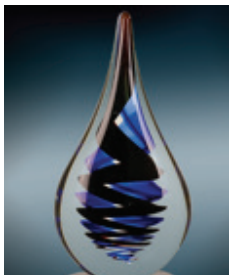
Just as I begin to feel tired and defeated and consider a non-environmental career move, I came to River Rally and heard Monica Lewis-Patrick speak... Sometimes it takes one to have powerful moment at River Rally to hit the reset button on my motivation. It’s tough out there but that’s why the River Network family is so important.” –Chelsea Blount, New River Conservancy

AWARDS



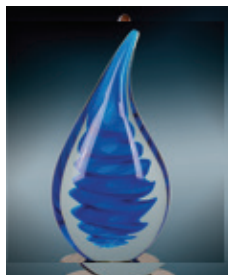
RIVER HEROES:

River Heroes are nominated annually by peers, selected by peers, and celebrated with peers. Recipients of this award are those who bring people together to solve water problems, seek solutions that are inclusive and equitable, go “above & beyond,” never give up, and inspire and help others to make a difference too. Their efforts to protect and restore their local rivers and waters are extraordinary in scope, scale, impact and heart. The award is hand made by River Network staff. Four or five awardees are selected annually.



COMPTON AWARD:

The recipient of this award is determined by River Network’s Board of Directors for their admirable and noteworthy achievements that have benefited multiple communities and rivers over many decades. This award was created in 2001 in honor James “Jim” Compton who inspired thousands of river activists and community members through his personal and professional contributions to river recreation and restoration. One awardee is selected each year.



EMERGING LEADER AWARD:

New in 2019, this award recognizes someone early in their professional career (10 years or less) and in age (35 years or older) who deserves our attention for their work at the intersection of water and equity. This award was inspired by former River Network board member Leslie Lowe. Leslie was a strident supporter of investing in and recognizing new and younger voices and perspectives in the water arena. Candidates self-nominate themselves through the registration process for River Rally. One awardee is selected each year.





DENNIS CHESTNUT, Founding Executive Director of Groundwork Anacostia River (Washington DC) A lifelong resident of Ward 7 in the far-northeast section of Washington, D.C., Chestnut is a master carpenter and vocational educator, but his dedication to youth development, community improvement, and civic duty has led to his involvement in many conservation projects. Chestnut is the co-founder of the Center for Green Urbanism and chairman of the Friends of Watts Branch. He is a board member of the East of the River Steel Band, SEED D.C. Public Charter School, and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay.



SAN JUANA "JUANI" OLIVARES, President and CEO, Genessee County Hispanic and Latino Collaborative (Flint, MI) At the time of the Flint water crisis, Olivares was a volunteer educator at GCHLC, teaching the Spanish-speaking residents of Flint how to navigate the crisis and find clean and safe water. Today, as President and CEO, Olivares uses her knowledge of the needs of her community and her resolve to make a difference to host a range of activities, including educational programming, social services, a water and filter pick up location, a food pantry, and health fairs.



MONICA LEWIS-PATRICK, Co-Founder and President, We the People of Detroit (Detroit, MI) Lewis-Patrick is actively engaged in almost every struggle on behalf of Detroit residents. As a former lead legislative policy analyst for Detroit City Council, Lewis-Patrick has authored legislation, conducted research, and delivered constituency services to thousands of city residents. She is a graduate of East Tennessee State University with a bachelor's in social work and sociology and a Master of Arts of Liberal Studies degree with a concentration in criminal justice/sociology and public management. She is currently one of the leaders at the forefront of the water rights struggle in Detroit.



JAMES RASMUSSEN, Executive Director of the Duwamish Tribe Advisory Council (Seattle, WA) Rasmussen has been an active voice in environmental, habitat, and community issues along the Duwamish River and in the Seattle region for over 30 years. Rasmussen has played a fundamental role in the EPA's formation of the Duwamish Superfund Roundtable, which will inform the next phase of the Cleanup Plan. His primary focus in his current role is elevating those most in need of climate justice, including low-income community members, POC+, youth, and elders.



**COMPTON
AWARD**

MARK VAN PUTTEN, President and CEO, Wege Foundation (Grand Rapids, MI) One of our nation's clean water heroes, Van Putten has worked tirelessly and often behind the scenes securing public dollars and private support for clean water and equitable access.



**EMERGING
LEADER AWARD**

KEVIN JEFFERY, Graduate Student, University of Texas (Austin, TX) Jeffery is the creator of the Blue Index which strives to measure emotional responses to water in the community while pursuing his degree. His efforts at the intersection of art, equity, and water are truly inspired.

PROGRAM DETAIL WORKSHOPS

Ninety learning opportunities were delivered at River Rally 2019. Sixty-five of these learning opportunities were delivered through workshops divided across eight themes. These workshops provided practical knowledge, tools, and new approaches to those in attendance to help address today's challenges related to people and water:

Working with Farmers and Ranchers:

We all need food and fiber, but what does it take to have agriculture and healthy rivers exist side-by-side? Workshops under this theme show what is possible in collaboration with farmers and ranchers, how considerations of equity and justice relate in rural landscapes, how communities have stood-up against bad actors, and how to build thriving partnerships that result in improvements to water contamination and river flows. [11 workshops.](#)

Building Resilient Cities and Communities:

With increasing numbers of cities and communities vulnerable to floods and droughts, we are seeking your insights for how to build resiliency into plans for the future. Are you working to build a future for your community where the river contributes to its economic and social vitality? Are you working to reduce harm to the most vulnerable members of your community? Workshops under this theme connect to these and related considerations. [8 workshops.](#)

Pursuing Safe, Clean and Affordable Drinking Water:

Everyone needs safe, clean and affordable water to drink. However, drinking water may not be as safe as generations of Americans have come to expect and a growing number of people in our country face unaffordable water bills while water utilities struggle to fund maintenance or replace aging pipes. How do we address these challenges in both urban and rural areas? [9 workshops.](#)

Advancing Robust and Effective Water Laws and Policies:

Does your work include empowering citizens, organizations, and governments to protect, strengthen, and implement water laws and policies? Does your work include new water law and policy innovations that support conservation or address concerns of those who are more vulnerable due to income, influence, or discrimination? [7 workshops.](#)

Civic Engagement for Our Water Future:

The cornerstone of a vibrant democracy is an engaged and empowered electorate, one that is informed, shows up at public meetings, votes in elections, and demands accountability. These workshops help demystify civic engagement and participation and understand how that engagement can be activated to achieve goals related to clean water and healthy rivers. [9 workshops.](#)

Expanding Impact through Science, Technology, and Monitoring:

Workshops in this track will share innovations, best practices, and success stories about scientific and technical approaches, highlighting tools and resources river champions and water advocates can use to expand their impact on the ground and in their organization. [7 workshops.](#)

Sustaining Strong Leaders, Organizations and Coalitions:

Workshops under this theme will offer information and skill-building opportunities on leadership and professional development, organizational and financial health, EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion), and topics in management, fundraising and communications to help nonprofit board and staff members be more effective in their river and watershed work. [6 workshops.](#)

Innovative Solutions from the Great Lakes Region:

We believe that the unique challenges and opportunities in the Great Lakes Region offer important examples for other regions to learn from and potentially emulate. These workshops give additional special attention to effective efforts and innovative solutions within this region. [8 workshops.](#)

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI):
35 workshops across River Rally 2019's 8 themes included EDI related content.

PROGRAM DETAILS

IDEA EXCHANGES

“[Rally has] been an invaluable experience... I’ve learned so much about diversity, civic engagement, becoming a change-maker, tools for better stream monitoring, the list goes on and on. I really am so thankful for this life-changing experience.” –Sarah Baker, Friends of the Shiawassee RiverCenter



River Rally 2019 featured a first of its kind exercise to begin Idea Exchanges: unique opportunities for attendees to connect during River Rally and beyond, to build their knowledge and network related to four key issues fundamental to today’s water crisis in communities across our nation, regarding civic engagement and water, and with respect to the future of the network. The four key issues are safe, clean, and affordable drinking water; water laws and policies; building resilient cities and communities; and healthy rivers in agricultural landscapes.

Conference registrants were asked to preselect which key issue was most relevant to their work through the registration process. Once at River Rally, skilled facilitators led structured conversations on these key issues, using these questions to frame the discussions:

- *What would help you make more or faster progress on this issue in your community?*
- *What should we work on collectively to achieve bigger impact across our network on this issue?*
- *What is the biggest priority for this collaborative work?*

Using this framework, participants explored ways to support each other’s efforts and spark new alliances working toward common goals.

The exchange dedicated to the future of the network took a different approach and imagined a future 5–10 years down the road and asked participants what this future of water protectors would feel like, look like, sound like, how it would operate, who it should include, and how it can be inclusive and engaging for black and brown leaders, as well as young leaders given the rapidly changing demographics of our country.

Results and commitments from each of the six idea exchanges were part of the closing remarks for River Rally 2019. Whether you attended Rally or not, we encourage and warmly welcome all who are interested to offer continued input and thoughts on these key issues and the network vision. It is our hope that these discussions lead to more connectivity and collaboration across the broader national network to further each key issue most effectively and build the network we all envision.



“I’ve learned so much by listening and collaborating with others in my watershed, whether they listen to country music on the tractor or K-pop on their bus commute. Everyone cares about water and deserves to be heard and protected along with the waterways themselves. I am enthused to go home and make new connections to work on my little watershed in Grand Rapids, Michigan.” –Andrea Lubberts, Plaster Creek Stewards

THANK YOU!

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