2021 IMPACTS

8,634 groups in the national network of water protectors across all 50 states

$428,304 in direct financial support to 123 local groups

94,563 people informed through our website, newsletter, and social media

99 customized consultations

3,872 people trained and educated through 243 events

34,225 discussions and engagements among 649 users in our new Online Community
River Network is unique in our role to connect and strengthen the diverse network of over 8,500 local groups, agencies, tribes, and utilities working for healthy rivers and clean water across the US. We are the ‘glue’ that makes this network a community, the creative force that sparks novel ways to gather, and the constant that is always seeking tools and resources that can make a difference to this nationwide network of water protectors creating lasting and sustainable change at the local level.

We push ourselves to deliver results, to be present for and with this community, and bring our deep-rooted conviction to examine and address the disproportionate harm of floods, droughts, and contamination experienced by low-income and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. What this humble team of less than 20 staff accomplishes annually is awe-inspiring—as this report shows. By leveraging the magic and power of this network, we . . .

... expanded connections and increased actions nationwide, using our Drinking Water Access Exchange group to leverage the newly passed low-income home water assistance program,

... launched agriculture coordinator positions to help stakeholders collaborate to identify, develop, and fund projects that benefit producers and the river,

... moved community groups across the country into action to implement Tools for Equitable Climate Resilience, amplifying the voice of those most impacted by climate change,

... spurred action and advocacy for equitable water infrastructure through our new Equitable Infrastructure Toolkit and meetings with policymakers.

As we reflect on the year behind us, we are proud of the resilience of our team and this community to stay the course. Together, we expanded access, safety, quality, and affordability for all, even amidst an ongoing pandemic and so many other social, economic, and environmental challenges. We are grateful you have joined us on this journey and hope you share the pride we feel for what we achieved together in 2021. We continue to devote our heart, mind, and energy into ensuring everyone has a seat at the table as we plan for, and work towards, a strong and sustainable water future for all.

With gratitude,

Nicole Silk
President

Jumana Vasi
Board Chair

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INTRODUCING OUR ONLINE COMMUNITY
Launched in January 2021, River Network’s Online Community is already the go-to platform for water protectors. We have seen discussion threads grow into Zoom meetings and facilitated the flow of knowledge and resources from member to member. The network knows first-hand that no victory is achieved alone, and that has been exemplified in this first year of online connectivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of our role as the “glue” binding the national network of water protectors together. In 2021 we built on this momentum further aligning the network through new ways to collaborate and take collective action for our nation’s waters.

RIVER RALLY
At the second virtual River Rally our team brought the very best in online engagement forward. Hosted within our Online Community platform, the event was highly interactive to stimulate and engage participants, including live content, on-demand workshops, open access to movies, small group engagement, and networking.

INNOVATIVE RIVER CLEAN-UPS
This year, we built on our long history organizing community clean-up events by utilizing the Litterati app and offering our partners a COVID-safe approach. We hosted a two-site, in-person clean-up with Colorado’s Breckenridge Brewery, drawing over 75 participants and partnered with Arizona’s Rio Reimagined for a hybrid Litterati and in-person clean-up along the Salt River, doubling the event’s impact.

450 registrants and presenters from 45 states and 5 countries
27% of registrants identify as racially diverse

649 Online Community Members
3,140 group or individual River Network memberships

River Network 2021 Impacts
2,981 volunteers engaged at virtual and in-person cleanup events
212,873 pounds of litter removed from communities and waterways

"This was simply amazing. Despite not being together... people cleaned up tens of thousands of pounds of litter everywhere from local parks, streams, and beaches to streets and playgrounds. What a wonderful week!"
–Kristin Webb, Clean the Bay Day Coordinator

"River Network kept us strong, creative—ever optimistic—through this hard time. We’re excited to be back in the river with youth with bright vistas ahead."
–Beth Stewart, Cahaba River Society

ALIGNING FOR ACTION
CENTERING EQUITY
This moment in history calls us to expand our equity, diversity, and inclusion work to ensure our network is well-equipped to increase its impact for the benefit of US waterways and communities. We also have work to do within our own organization. This year, led by a staff committee, we developed internal land acknowledgment and pronoun usage policies, updated our employee handbook, and worked with the Avarna Group to examine and address the ways traits of white supremacy culture show up in our organization.

TRANSFORMING DATA INTO ACTION
Thousands of local groups are collecting data and information on the nation’s water resources and their communities. This year, we encouraged groups in the Delaware River Basin and beyond to use their data for action, showcasing how our partner, Bartram’s Garden, leveraged community-collected information to improve state water quality protections. Moving forward, we hope to spur data to action for rivers across the country.

BUILDING STRONG LEADERS
To effectively address the issues facing our waterways, water conservation leaders, organizations, and networks must be sophisticated in their strategies, well-funded, and smartly led. This year, we revamped our Leadership Development programs to deliver what network leaders need, including a new professional development program and in-depth training to help three local groups build community-centered leadership programs.

Today, I and one half-time staff person with board members and volunteers have built Cayuga Lake Watershed Network into an effective watershed-wide organization... thanks in large part to my River Network education.”

–Hilary Lambert, Cayuga Lake Watershed Network
ACCESS

DRINKING WATER FOR ALL

OUR IMPACT
When funding for the low-income home water assistance program (LIHWAP) became available this year, River Network was poised to help the network parse, understand, and leverage this federal funding to advance water affordability in their communities. Our Drinking Water Access Exchange group began as an informal cohort to discuss water shutoffs at the onset of COVID-19, but has now pivoted and deepened into an organized, leading-edge community rallying together to ensure local communities can equitably access these new federal funds.

484 individuals educated at 24 trainings

$29,500 in direct financial support to 12 local groups

17 articles and new online resources including a new Drinking Water 101 video series

OUR COMMITMENT
Drinking water is fundamental to our health, economy, and well-being. However, across our nation, access is not equal or equitable. By equipping local groups with the knowledge and capacity to advocate for their needs and influence water utilities, we can help guarantee that no one will be deprived of access to this crucial resource.

“...

This group has been an invaluable resource... When we were preparing our analysis of the implementation of the LIHWAP program, members helped identify which states had issued their plans. This alignment was critical to our being able to analyze as many plans as possible.”

–Alexandra Campbell-Ferrari, The Center for Water Security and Cooperation
Collaboration
A Future with Farms

Our Impact

Across Colorado, a shift is underway: agricultural stakeholders want to become effective advocates for local water projects. River Network is a driving force in bringing together the agricultural and conservation communities—supporting planning efforts and identifying water challenges—and now we are taking the next step, actively supporting solutions that benefit farms, ranches, and the river. In 2021, we partnered with Steamboat Springs’s Community Agriculture Alliance and the Mancos Conservation District, hiring two new “Ag Coordinators,” to help stakeholders take aligned action to identify, develop, and fund water projects. The first two Coordinators are off to an impressive start; so impressive that we’re already expanding the program across the state of Colorado.

289 individuals educated at 9 trainings
$18,250 in direct financial support to 2 local groups
7 articles and new online resources

“Agriculture needs water and the land to survive... I think they need to be at the front of the table, leading the conversation. Our outreach has sparked some real interest, with producers that have never traditionally been involved in river health. Seeking them out and saying, ‘I want your opinion,’ perhaps gives them enough power to start sharing.”

–Ben Wolcott, Wolcott Ranches & Mancos Conservation District Agricultural Consultant

Our Commitment

Members of our network want to build partnerships with farmers and ranchers to improve the health of rivers throughout the US, but many don’t know where to begin. We see an opportunity to forge these partnerships, including with those who have been excluded from financial and other opportunities due to race, ethnicity, and gender.
OUR IMPACT
This spring saw the launch of our Tools for Equitable Climate Resilience, the first step in a direct, involved, supportive program to move community groups into action. Our team put the tools to work, granting 11 organizations funds, planning resources, and direct consulting time with River Network staff to support their implementation of Community-Led Research (CLR) and the design and planning of custom Leadership Development programs. While each organization’s project unfolded in a unique way, they shared a common goal: build community members’ skills and confidence to actively participate in their local decision-making landscapes, giving a voice to those most impacted by climate change and lack of investment.

607 individuals educated at 18 trainings
$95,484 in direct financial support to 30 local groups
20 articles and new online resources

“River Network support was crucial to us getting this program off the ground. It pushed this work from a community-driven idea to a reality that is just over the horizon.”
–Steve Anderson, Ellerbe Creek Watershed Association

OUR COMMITMENT
Communities across the US face increasing risks of flooding and other weather-related natural disasters, whose impacts disproportionately affect low-income and communities of color. River Network is a trusted and valued partner for grassroots groups and key federal agencies working towards climate resilience, with a critical role to play in continuing to bring diverse stakeholders together for the future of our local communities nationwide.
OUR IMPACT

With a new Administration and Congress in place this year, River Network’s policy work was perfectly positioned to pivot from defense to offense. The word of the moment? Infrastructure. We partnered with American Rivers to create Action Days, resulting in more than 75 virtual face-to-face meetings between network members and their Congressional representatives, where advocates highlighted the need for equitable water infrastructure investment. For other advocates across the country, we released our Equitable Water Infrastructure Toolkit, a crash course on water utilities, affordability, and infrastructure basics, along with practical advice on influencing decision-making processes. Now, we’re supporting six community groups to put the toolkit to work and planning the next series of Action Days—in Washington, DC, after River Rally 2022.

918 individuals educated at 28 trainings
75+ people connected to 50+ members of congress across 27 different states
36 articles and new online resources including a new video on the Clean Water Act

OUR COMMITMENT

Over 50% of US rivers, streams, and lakes fail to meet clean water standards. We must, in continued partnership with national and regional coalitions, provide a dynamic policy approach and stay on the leading edge of all levels of water policy, equipping local groups and advocates with the tools they need to design and implement effective advocacy campaigns that center civic engagement and equity.

The training introduced a person new to advocacy in a way that showed them, pretty clearly, how to play a valuable role.”

–2021 Action Days participant
87% of River Network staff have received training related to power, privilege, and racism

27% of River Network Board Members and 22% of River Network staff identify as BIPOC

It is River Network’s practice to begin meetings and gatherings by recognizing and acknowledging the Native peoples whose traditional territory includes the land and waters on which we meet. Here, we would like to recognize the following tribes, the original caretakers of the lands on which our staff are located:

Arapaho, Anishinabewaki, Cherokee, Cheyenne, Eno, Kaskaskia, Keyauwee, Kickapoo, Leni-Lenape, Lumbee, Myaamia, Ockaneechi, Peeria, Potawatomi, Saponi, Shakori, Sioux, Sissipawah, Skaruhreh/Tuscarora, Ute, Yuchi
As we near the end of our 2018–2022 strategic plan, we look back with a sense of gratification for the meaningful accomplishments we have made to align and empower our network toward collective action—and we look forward to charting the next five years’ focus to amplify our network’s voices, increase its connectivity, and strengthen our influence. Thank you for being a part of our journey, and we invite you to join us as we forge our bold and ambitious path ahead.
Our Supporters

Support from our corporate and foundation partners allows us to continue to innovate and provide impactful resources and programs for our nationwide network. In a year filled with so much uncertainty, we want to express our deep gratitude to our funders—both new and old—who sustained our work, including those who have been with us for five or more years, indicated with an asterisk.

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United States Environmental Protection Agency*
United States Forest Service*
Walton Family Foundation*
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Wege Foundation*
Wild and Scenic Film Festival*

Special recognition to these partners who helped significantly advance our work at the intersection of water, equity, and justice:

C. S. Mott Foundation
Fresh Sound Foundation
Groundwork USA
Kresge Foundation

Spring Point Partners
United States Environmental Protection Agency

*Funders who have supported River Network for five or more years.
We recognize there are many worthy and important causes and are honored and humbled by the individuals and family foundations who choose to support River Network. Supporters new and old have helped catapult our work and create impacts that ripple throughout the nationwide network of water protectors. We recognize our stalwart supporters who have provided support for five or more years with an asterisk.

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New this year, River Network’s “Climate Justice Flow Funding Circle” promises to disrupt traditional philanthropy and enable the flow of resources to where they will make the greatest difference locally. We are incredibly grateful for the trust our donors place in us to make such innovation possible.

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River Network empowers and unites people and communities to protect and restore rivers and other waters that sustain all life. We envision a future with clean and ample water for people and nature, where local caretakers are well-equipped, effective and courageous champions for our rivers. We believe that everyone should have access to affordable, clean water and healthy rivers.

www.rivernetwork.org