

URBANWATERS

FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP

Restoring Urban Waters, Revitalizing Communities

Northwest Indiana Watershed (Portage, Indiana)



Ambassador

Jennifer Birchfield

(219) 989-4156

jbirchfield@pnw.edu

Co-Leads

Drew Hart (USFS)

(847) 866-9311 x15

bhart@fs.fed.us

Peg Donnelly (EPA)

(312) 886-6109

donnely.peggy@epa.gov

Lynda Lancaster (NPS)

Overall Assessment of the Partnership Since the Beginning

In the 20th century, northwest Indiana's extraordinary Great Lake Michigan shoreline, and associated wetlands and tributaries, were extensively modified for human use. Wetlands were drained, rivers were straightened and their banks hardened, stormwater and industrial discharges were routed to surface waters, and riparian areas were developed for heavy industrial, commercial, and residential uses. Despite the extensive environmental impacts of these changes, a remarkable number of natural features remain. The Northwest Indiana Urban Waters Partnership region contains more than 1,200 miles of waterways, 45 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, and over 15,000 acres of National Park land with globally rare dune and swale habitat and a range of threatened and endangered species. Today, the region is a unique patchwork of remnant wetlands, recreational waterways, industrialized shorelines, and urban development.

Since 2011, the Northwest Indiana Urban Waters Partnership has invited not-for-profit community groups, private entities, and local, state, and federal governmental agencies to come together to share information and plan together for the future of the region's waterways. Three federal agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and National Park Service, have consistently acted as co-leads and have advocated for the partnership within their own agencies.

Starting in 2012, a paid Urban Waters Ambassador, funded first by the U.S. Forest Service and later by EPA through cooperative agreements with a local non-profit, has coordinated partnership activities and acted as a communication conduit between local and federal partners. The partnership encourages collaboration on local projects, attempts to fill requests for technical assistance and expertise, brings attention to funding opportunities, and seeks to build capacity among partner organizations to enhance existing projects and create new opportunities.

The partnership was founded without pre-determining which waterways would be focused on. Early on, partners discussed and selected local waterways with the greatest need for attention and the greatest potential for change. They chose major and minor tributaries that feed Lake Michigan across three counties of northwest Indiana:

- Deep River Watershed
- Grand Calumet River Area of Concern
- Little Calumet River East Branch and Salt Creek
- Trail Creek Watershed

One early goal was to build trust and encourage collaboration among partners. Many agencies and organizations in the region had limited histories of collaboration and no Urban Waters-like alliance existed across jurisdictional and organizational mission boundaries. Today, representatives from almost 70 different government, not-for-profit and private entities participate in quarterly partnership meetings and receive the monthly e-newsletter. Over time, some of the many successful initiatives have included: 1.) establishing a regional Urban Forestry Working Group to improve urban forestry capacity and maintain tree canopy coverage in areas impacted by the Emerald Ash Borer; 2.) providing guidance to implement cost-share programs that install green infrastructure and encourage agricultural best management practices; and 3.) helping with permitting and funding to install the state's first wheelchair-accessible kayak/canoe launches. New opportunities for collaboration continue to arise as more organizations participate in the partnership.

Members of the Partnership

The Northwest Indiana partnership is an open network of not-for-profit community groups, private entities, and local, state, and federal governmental agencies that share goals related to improving water quality and reconnecting the region's residents to local waterways. Together, all partners commit to promoting collaboration and communication across the partnership's broad geographic area. This approach increases cohesion and reduces duplicative efforts to improve water quality, increase recreation potential, engage communities, and meet other Urban Waters goals.

As of 2017, the partnership includes 14 participating federal agencies, 3 state departments, 17 municipal/county partners, and 35 non-governmental entities. A total of 391 individuals receive the monthly e-newsletter.

Federal Partners

- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (Lead)
- Environmental Protection Agency (Lead)
- Department of Interior
 - National Park Service (Lead)
 - Bureau of Reclamation
 - Fish & Wildlife Service
 - U.S. Geological Survey
- Corporation for National and Community Service
- Department of Commerce
 - Economic Development Administration
 - National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration
 - National Weather Service
- Department of Defense
 - U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- Department of Homeland Security
 - Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of Transportation

State Partners

- City of East Chicago
- Indiana Department of Environmental Management
- Indiana Department of Health
- Indiana Department of Natural Resources
 - Lake Michigan Coastal Program

Local/County/Regional Government Partners

- City of East Chicago
- City of Gary
- City of Hammond
- City of Hobart
- City of Merrillville
- City of Michigan City
- City of Valparaiso
- Indiana Dunes Tourism
- LaPorte County Health Department
- LaPorte County Parks & Recreation
- LaPorte County Soil & Water Conservation District
- Lake County Health Department

- Lake County Parks & Recreation
- Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission
- Porter County Health Department
- Porter County Parks & Recreation Town of Chesterton

Non-governmental Partners

- Alliance for the Great Lakes
- Association for the Wolf Lake Initiative
- Audubon Society
- Cardno
- Chicago Wilderness
- Coffee Creek Watershed Conservancy
- Conservation Connections
- Dunes Learning Center
- Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation
- Haas & Associates Engineers
- Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant
- Indiana Geological Survey
- Indiana University Northwest

- Izaak Walton League
- Legacy Foundation
- Miller Spotlight
- National Parks Conservation Association
- Northwest Indiana Forum
- Northwest Indiana Paddling Association
- Northern Indiana Public Service Company
- Northwest Indiana Steelheaders
- Openlands
- Purdue University/Purdue Northwest
- Save the Dunes
- Shedd Aquarium
- Shirley Heinze Land Trust
- Student Conservation Association
- TalTree Arboretum and Gardens
- The Field Museum
- The Nature Conservancy
- Unity Foundation
- Wildlife Habitat Council
- Wilderness Inquiry

The Ambassador

Starting in 2012, a dedicated Ambassador has coordinated all partnership activities, planned and facilitated partnership meetings, acted as a communication conduit among partners, and represented Urban Waters at local meetings of commissions, watershed groups, and similar organizations. The Ambassador has served the critical roles of keeping abreast of developments in local projects, being a go-to person for partners in need of technical assistance, and being the ‘face’ of Urban Waters for partners in the region. This has been especially important for EPA and the U.S. Forest Service which do not have offices in northwest Indiana.

Because of needs identified early on in partnership meetings, the Ambassador has consistently provided important support to partners in the form of meeting facilitation (at both partnership and non-partnership meetings), grant writing assistance, and researching and sharing relevant funding opportunities. The role of the Ambassador has evolved over time but has always included being an active coalition-builder and an impartial supporter of each partner’s goals as they relate to the Urban Waters goals.

Year-round, the Ambassador and local representatives from the 3 lead federal agencies (U.S. Forest Service, EPA and National Park Service) talk via conference call every other week. The Ambassador provides updates on local events and activities and the team discusses action steps to meet partnership goals and address new projects and challenges as they arise.

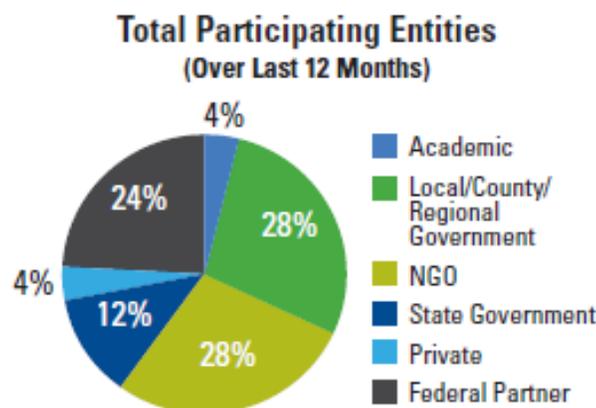
Partnership Meetings & Monthly e-Newsletter

The partnership maintains its cohesion by holding/attending:

- Full partnership quarterly meetings,
- Biweekly core federal calls,
- Ambassador attendance of local weekly, biweekly, and monthly non-profit and county/local/regional government meetings, and
- An annual all-federal meeting.

The Northwest Indiana Partnership convenes its full membership quarterly. The agenda always includes significant time for partner updates, project updates, event announcements, and requests for technical assistance. Some meetings include a presentation on a timely topic of local interest such as testing for lead in drinking water or an overview of a major local project that is about to get underway. Every year, the January partnership meeting recaps accomplishments from the previous year and solicits input on the Urban Waters work plan for the coming year.

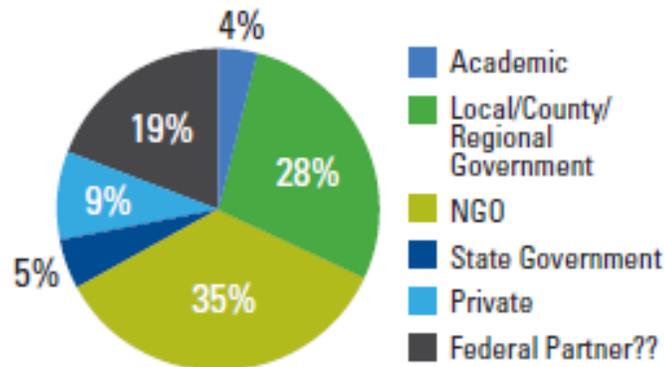
Attendance varies from meeting to meeting, but each of the lead federal agencies tries to have a representative at each meeting. In general, the greatest number of meeting attendees are representatives from local, county, and/or regional governments (28%) and non-profit organizations (28%). The figure below provides an overview of meeting attendees in 2016.



Because the partnership covers a wide geographic area, meeting locations rotate across the region to share the burden of traveling among the partners. The Ambassador arranges meeting locations, recruits speakers, develops the agenda with input from all partners, and shares meeting minutes via the monthly e-newsletter.

Separate from the full membership meetings, representatives from participating federal agencies meet once a year to assess partnership progress, discuss current challenges, raise awareness about partner requests for technical assistance, and share agency priorities and upcoming funding opportunities or other resources.

Total Newsletter Participating Entities



The Ambassador compiles and distributes an e-newsletter via Constant Contact each month with short articles, descriptions of upcoming training and educational opportunities (both live and online), and a list of funding opportunities with approaching deadlines. The newsletters also contain notices about partnership meetings, minutes from previous meetings, event announcements from across the region, and stories highlighting partner news and successes. Among the individuals who receive the e-newsletter, the largest share (35%) are affiliated with nonprofit organizations (see figure above). The newsletter's average open rate is 31%.

The most requested information in the e-newsletter is the list of funding opportunities with approaching deadlines. This information is arranged so that partners can quickly identify due dates, award ceilings, match requirements, grant priorities, and general information about the funding program. The e-newsletter also reminds recipients that the Ambassador can provide grant writing assistance on request and that core federal partners may be able to help develop or pre-review certain proposals. As a result of this support over time, Urban Waters partners have increased the number of grant proposals, as well as the strength of proposals, submitted to funding programs since the beginning of the partnership.

Work Plan

Each January, the full partnership meeting focuses on reviewing the previous year's accomplishments and developing a work plan for the coming year. Watershed by watershed (with a separate section for region-wide issues), the work plan details partnership tasks, projects, and goals. The plan generally separates out the work of the Ambassador and federal agency representatives from the work that state and local partners undertake, except where this coincides.

Many Urban Waters activities support or advance the goals of existing local plans such as:

- Trail Creek Watershed Management Plan,
- Salt Creek Watershed Management Plan,
- East Branch of the Little Calumet River Watershed Management Plan,
- Deep River Watershed Management Plan,
- Grand Calumet River Area of Concern Outreach & Education Plan,
- National Park Service East Branch of the Little Calumet River Environmental Assessment & River Use Plan, and
- Septic System Maintenance and Care Outreach Plan.

Regarding partnership accomplishments, the Ambassador and the lead federal partners have taken care over time to celebrate individual partners' successes without taking undue credit. This has taken the form, for example, of claiming credit for helping a partner secure funding for a project without taking credit for completing the project itself (unless the Ambassador or the federal leads were directly involved in carrying out the project). This deliberate accounting has helped build trust between the local partners and the federal agencies.



Volunteers modify woody debris to promote recreation along the East Branch of the Little Calumet River.
Photo Credit: Lynda Lancaster

Major Actions Taken Since the Beginning of the Partnership

The Northwest Indiana Urban Waters Partnership has created a framework that empowers local and state partners to seek and receive help to achieve their goals. This has included:

- Assisting local partners in identifying relevant funding opportunities and developing competitive proposals;
- Introducing a regional urban forestry initiative to help communities plan for, plant, and maintain trees with help from the U.S. Forest Service, the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission and other local partners;
- Adding federal technical resources and funding to longstanding efforts to reduce dangerous bacteria levels along Lake Michigan in East Chicago;
- Supporting development of annual Wilderness Inquiry Canoemobile programs that bring students and families on free canoe trips on local waterways and offer learning opportunities at on-shore education stations;
- Researching local homeowners' attitudes toward septic system maintenance and using lessons learned to help develop a regional septic system care outreach campaign;
- Assisting local partners in implementing various watershed projects and cost-share programs.

Major Impacts of the Partnership

Highlights of the Northwest Indiana Urban Waters Partnership's major accomplishments include:

Funding for clean water projects—Urban Waters has helped build capacity among partners who may not have submitting funding proposals without assistance. Due to these efforts, seven grants totaling approximately \$575,000 were awarded to local UW partners in 2015 and grants totaling \$741,700 were awarded in 2016. Many of the funded projects implement green infrastructure with the goals of controlling local flooding and reducing the number of Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) action days. For example, in 2016 with Ambassador assistance and encouragement, the Town of Highland obtained funding to develop a tree planting plan to reduce CSOs.

Restoring beach access in underserved areas—Federal Urban Waters partners have obtained funding and provided technical assistance to reduce *E. coli* contamination and restore natural ecosystem function at Jeorse Park Beach (East Chicago), one of the top 10 'dirtiest' beaches in the nation because of consistently high bacteria levels in the water.

Championing the first wheelchair-accessible boat launches in the state—In 2015, the Urban Waters partnership helped Michigan City find funding for and install the state's first wheelchair-

accessible boat launch. In 2016, Urban Waters supported the installation of additional wheelchair-accessible launches in Hobart and Gary. There is enormous local pride in being the first communities in Indiana to provide these types of launches. Currently, Northwest Indiana is being marketed as a paddling and fishing destination; there is growing demand to expand residents' water recreation opportunities. There is also great potential to increase tourism by restoring and improving access to local waterways.

[Creating additional ecotourism opportunities for national park land](#)—In 2014, at the request of local organizations, the Urban Waters Ambassador and U.S. Forest Service helped the National Park Service complete an Environmental Assessment for the East Branch of the Little Calumet River within Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. The resulting River Use Management Plan, which is pending approval, will facilitate recreational access to the approximately eight miles of the river and is expected to enhance the local economy by attracting paddling tourism.

[Protecting public health through regional septic system outreach and education efforts](#)—In 2016, the Ambassador and federal Urban Waters partners completed a regional study on local homeowners' septic system maintenance and care practices. Local health departments, the State Department of Health, and several local organizations are using the study's findings to develop a targeted, effective regional outreach and education campaign. That campaign promotes proper septic system maintenance with the ultimate goal of preventing septic system contamination of local surface waters and groundwater.

[Creating a regional urban forestry plan](#)—The U.S. Forest Service funded and developed Urban Tree Canopy (UTC+) datasets for the three Northwest Indiana Urban Waters counties (Lake, Porter, and LaPorte) to inform decision makers about existing urban forest resources. Building on this information, a new urban forestry planning group is developing a regional plan to help municipalities recover from tree loss caused by the Emerald Ash Borer. Urban Waters partners have also created the CommuniTree program to help local communities plant and maintain trees.

[Providing hands-on education to underserved youth](#)—Many funders including the National Park Service have provided funding to bring non-profit Wilderness Inquiry's Canoemobile program to northwest Indiana. During several weeks of Canoemobile visits each fall, students and families from across the region have the opportunity to learn about and experience local waterways. In 2016, about 10,000 young people and families took Canoemobile paddling trips. Supplemental programming includes land-based education stations with displays and activities related to water quality and environmental stewardship.

Major Actions Planned for the Future

In March 2017, a new Ambassador was hired for the Northwest Indiana Urban Waters Partnership. The Ambassador has worked with the core federal partners to create a work plan for 2017-18 based upon input and requests from partners. The Ambassador will continue to update this document to incorporate new needs and projects as they are identified. In collaboration with the Lake Michigan Coastal Program (LMCP), the Ambassador is systematically conducting interviews with representatives from each community in the partnership area to inventory water quality, quantity, and access projects and to assess needs for assistance. Key actions planned include:

- **Communication.** Continue to organize regular partnership meetings and provide monthly e-newsletters and additional communication as needed. Each newsletter/meeting will serve to link partners to useful resources and to facilitate further collaborations.
- **Funding.** Continue to help watershed groups, municipalities, and other partners with proposal development and project implementation.
- **Septic System Projects.** Continue to collaborate with the LMCP and Septic System Coordination Work Group in efforts to reduce septic system failure. Also, assist with implementation of a septic system maintenance outreach and education program funded by the LMCP.
- **University Internships.** Continue to work with all partners to connect students from Purdue University Northwest and other local universities with internship or experiential learning credit opportunities that support Urban Waters work. In particular, help facilitate an internship to conduct an inventory of local stream crossings.
- **Master Watershed Steward Program.** Continue to work with Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, Purdue University, and other partners to develop the Indiana Master Watershed Steward Program.
- **Workshops.** Collaborate with partners to develop and present workshops on topics like grant writing, grant opportunities, and other topics as requested by partners. Specifically, partners have expressed interest in workshops on permitting and green infrastructure design and installation.
- **HUC Boundaries.** Continue to follow up with US Geological Survey on Watershed Boundary Dataset boundary re-definition for waterways in northwest Indiana. This will allow partners to plan projects for the Lake Michigan and Mississippi River watersheds.
- **Urban Forestry.** Continue to help coordinate a regional urban forestry initiative and expand the CommuniTree program. U.S. Forest Service will continue to provide technical assistance.
- **Education.** Continue to assist partners with watershed education efforts such as Wilderness Inquiry Canoemobile visits. Explore the need for an Urban Waters education and outreach subcommittee to better coordinate public and youth education on water topics.
- **NRCS Involvement.** As requested by local partners, encourage Natural Resources Conservation Service involvement in local watershed efforts in Northwest Indiana.

- **Watershed Management Plan Implementation.** Continue to help local watershed groups implement their watershed plans through cost-share programs, education, and other projects.

Major Challenges for the Future

The Northwest Indiana Urban Waters partners continue to work together to address challenges. Although local partners are becoming more experienced grant writers and grant managers, many still face challenges such as limited capacity to manage a large amount of funding, time constraints, or lack of matching funds. Sustaining and maintaining projects after the initial installation can also be challenging for many projects. The Ambassador and federal partners can help to address these challenges by continuing to provide grant writing support and by facilitating communication and collaboration among local organizations.

Northwest Indiana's Lake Michigan watershed consists of approximately 30 individual municipalities across three counties. Differing perspectives and locations can create collaboration challenges. Additionally, the Partnership includes many Chicago-based organizations and agencies. While bi-state collaboration is increasing, the need for trust and relationship-building across boundaries and among organization and agencies working in the region is on-going.

Part of the Ambassador's role is to act as a catalyst to help state and local partners meet their own water-related goals by developing and implementing successful projects. The Ambassador also keeps federal agencies engaged with on-the-ground community work through attendance at local meetings and continuous communication with a variety of partners. Funding for the Northwest Indiana Ambassador was previously provided by the U.S. Forest Service and is currently provided by EPA. Current funding will support the position until about May 2019 but is uncertain beyond that. If future funding is not secured to sustain the Ambassador position, the Northwest Indiana Urban Waters partnership could face significantly reduced capacity in the future.