

FRESHWATER VOICES



2024 ISSUE 2

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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

WHAT IS DRIVING THE COST OF WATER AND WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Jill Ryan, Executive Director

Your morning coffee isn't the only thing costing more these days. Water bills are skyrocketing, and residents in the Great Lakes region are facing some of the nation's highest rates.

At Freshwater Future, we are committed to making sure people have access to clean, safe, and affordable water. Inside this issue we will dive into some of the factors that are contributing to higher water rates.

Like most problems, it is complicated. Old age is one factor, with much of the water system infrastructure having passed the end of its lifespan of more than 50 years. In some cities, decreasing populations mean fewer customers to divide the cost of upgrades.

Ensuring the water is safe and clean has become increasingly costly. When a drinking water source is contaminated with toxic chemicals like lead and PFAS or exposed to harmful algal blooms, pretreatment is a must.

Pretreatment such as filters can cost in the hundreds of millions to install and maintain. Industrial contamination of drinking water sources is on the rise as a result of booms like mining for metals to build electric batteries. Lead pipes leach harmful toxic lead into water and must be removed.

Finally, with climate change, our region is experiencing more extreme rain events, flooding, multiple thaw and freeze cycles—all that add expenses to water system management.

After years of neglect, the price tag to upgrade pipes and facilities is significant. Private water companies, seeing an opportunity, are increasingly purchasing municipally-owned water systems. Unfortunately, for customers, when a system is privatized it results in an average monthly increase of 59% in water bills.

Inside this issue, we are proud to share how Freshwater Future is hard at work to address these issues and more to ensure that water is clean, safe, and affordable.

JOIN US! VIRTUAL WELLNESS SESSIONS



Protecting water is hard work. Learn and practice proven methods that reduce stress and help you re-energize. Our facilitator, Jonathan Relucio, is a skilled practitioner of trauma-informed mindfulness, yoga, and meditation with over 20 years of experience advocating for social justice.

These sessions are held monthly on the 4th Thursday.

NO COST and everyone is welcome.

Pre-registration required
Scan the QR code to register or visit
freshwaterfuture.org/water-watchers-wellness



LEAD PIPE REPLACEMENT: A LIFELINE FOR SAFE DRINKING WATER

Lead pipe replacement is the only real long-term solution to eliminating lead from drinking water, but the cost of these projects is enormous. Fortunately, the 2021 infrastructure bill provided a critical boost to these efforts, offering low-interest loans, forgivable loans, and grants to help communities undertake this vital work. For disadvantaged communities, securing these funds can prevent significant increases in water rates.

However, the clock is ticking—without renewed infrastructure funding, these resources will run out in a few years. Freshwater Future is stepping up by helping communities access the current funds and advocating for Congress to allocate additional funding. Our goal is to ensure that every community in the Great Lakes region, regardless of its economic status, can replace lead pipes swiftly and protect residents from the dangers of lead-contaminated water.

Replacing these pipes is a complex and costly process, with replacement costs potentially as high as \$10,000 for the homeowner's private portion of the line. Some communities have funding to replace lead service lines on both the public and private sides to reduce the financial burden on property owners. Freshwater Future is encouraging communities to prioritize these efforts and provide financial assistance and informing the public that it's crucial to contact local water utilities to inquire about costs and available financial aid for replacing the privately-owned section.

THE AFFORDABILITY PROBLEM

Water affordability is a growing problem in the United States. Researchers have estimated that within the coming few years, approximately 33% of the U.S. population will have water bills that are not affordable. We often learn that water is becoming or has become unaffordable only when people lose access to water because they couldn't pay their water bill. In other words, we set water rates based on the need to meet expenses of our water utilities, rather than considering why water costs are rising and causing water to become unaffordable and addressing that problem head on.

As water contamination, aging infrastructure, replacing dangerous lead pipes and other factors continue to increase the cost of water for families, Freshwater Future and our partners are pushing to ensure that affordable water is available to everyone and that innovative ideas are pursued to reduce overall costs of providing and treating water for a sustainable future.



BENTON HARBOR RESIDENTS FACE WATER SHUTOFFS AFTER LEAD PIPE REPLACEMENT

This summer, for the first time since Benton Harbor, MI replaced its lead pipes due to years of high lead levels, residents are receiving water shutoff notices. This predominantly low-income community of color has been burdened with the highest water bills in the area for over a decade, and now, many are facing shutoffs due to unaffordable bills.

In response, Freshwater Future, in collaboration with the Benton Harbor Community Water Council, is assisting residents in accessing financial assistance through the local community agency. Eligible residents can receive up to \$3,000 to cover overdue water and sewer bills, \$9,000 for plumbing repairs, and reconnection fee coverage. Recognizing the complexity of the application process, Freshwater Future has been training local advocates to help residents navigate these barriers and apply for the assistance they need.



Freshwater Future's Lead Service Line Replacement Guide outlines the process and what resident's need to know. Go to freshwaterfuture.org/lead or scan the QR code to learn more.



THE PRIVATIZATION OF WATER SYSTEMS AND ITS IMPACT ON GREAT LAKES COMMUNITIES

Bill, Margo and Peter, residents of New Garden Township, Pennsylvania created Keep Water Affordable, a sponsored project of Freshwater Future, after their wastewater system was purchased by an investor-owned utility and subsequently raised rates over 85% in two years. A recent Freshwater Hero Award recipient, Keep Water Affordable is now helping to educate other communities about privatization concerns. The group is committed to advocating for policies that protect public water systems and hold utility companies accountable.

The privatization of water systems - when for-profit companies buy municipally-owned water systems - in the Great Lakes region has significantly impacted local communities by exacerbating financial inequality and undermining the public's control of their water resources. Privatization, often driven by the idea that private entities can manage water resources more efficiently than public entities, has led to increased costs, reduced accessibility due to water shut offs, and sometimes reduced water quality for residents in these communities.

One of the primary results of water privatization is the dramatic increase in water rates. Private companies, focused on generating profit, often raise prices to not just cover operational costs, but also ensure a return on investment. In communities such as New Garden Township in Pennsylvania, residents have faced dramatic rate increases, burdening locals with water insecurity, impacting health and hygiene, and further marginalizing vulnerable populations.



One of the main reasons for the increase in privatization has been the adoption of laws that make purchasing these public systems profitable for private companies. While such a sale can provide immediate financial relief to cash-strapped local governments, the high purchase prices are often passed on to consumers through increased water rates, compounding the financial strain on residents.

To safeguard the fundamental right to water and ensure the sustainability of water resources, we must prioritize public management and investment in water systems. The focus should be on equitable access, infrastructure improvement, and environmental conservation. Privatization profits a few at the expense of many; it's time to put communities first. Freshwater Future is committed to working to give communities the tools they need to make fully informed decisions about their water systems and encouraging them to involve their residents in those decisions.

Visit keepwateraffordable.org to learn more about privatization and what you can do to take action in your community.



DRINKING WATER SAFETY VULNERABLE TO MINING AND INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITIES

Today, demand for raw materials is driving a resurgence in resource extraction projects in the Great Lakes region. For example, an upswing in metal mining is fueled by demand for electric car batteries and technology like phones. Aggregate, sand, and gravel mining are booming due to investments in U.S. road infrastructure upgrades. However, when these activities pollute our drinking water sources - both surface and groundwater - we all pay the price.

Since 1996, Freshwater Future has supported our grassroots partners in their efforts to advocate for protecting the watersheds, natural and human communities, and drinking waters that are impacted by mining operations.

In that time, we have provided over 100 grants to community based organizations, totaling over \$345,000, working on resource extraction like mining. In that same time, we have been able to assist our partners to help create, share, and mobilize supporters like you for their calls to action. Whether it is submitting a public comment, showing up to a town hall, or calling your representatives, we strive to strengthen these movements by amplifying the voices of our local leaders across the region.

And when we speak up - we win! When a mining company proposed an expansion that would fill 77.9 acres of wetlands and 4,661 linear feet of a stream in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, you responded to our call for action. We worked with our partners at Mining Action Group and Citizens for Safe and Clean



Lake Superior to have hundreds of you send in comments to Michigan's Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy. The substantial public opposition, combined with comments from federal agencies echoing concerns about impacts to a well-documented bald eagle nest near the site, had an impact. In July, the mining company withdrew the permit application.

A proposed copper mine in Michigan's beloved Porcupine Mountains State Park recently failed to receive a \$50 million grant from the State of Michigan. One of our Fall 2023 grantees, Protect the Porkies engaged over two thousand water protectors who educated their legislators about the project's potential impacts. The result - the Michigan Senate elected NOT to pass the grant with the budget. While these wins show the strength of our collective power, we can and will continue to protect our drinking water resources.

Freshwater Future invests in people and places to ensure that our surface waters and groundwater will continue to provide safe and affordable drinking water and recreation for generations to come.

For an in-depth look at the expansion of mining in the Northern Great Lakes region, check out our blog, "Metals Demand Spurs Mining Development in Northern Great Lakes" at freshwaterfuture.org/monitoring-mines-in-the-great-lakes.



Data Source: USGS

FRESHWATER FUTURE AND PARTNERS: PROTECTING OUR WATERS TOGETHER



Freshwater Future Honored as the Inaugural Organizational Recipient of the River Hero Award

Freshwater Future was honored as the inaugural organizational recipient of the River Hero Award at River Network's River Rally held in Grand Rapids, MI. Jill Ryan, Freshwater Future's Executive Director said of the award, "This award is really for our many amazing grassroots partners across the region. Freshwater Future is proud to accept this award as a recognition for the hard work, dedication, and impact of local advocates fighting for the people and waters of the Great Lakes."

Jill Ryan, Freshwater Future Executive Director accepts the 2024 River Award from Raj Shukla, President and CEO of River Network.



L-R: Anna Bunting, Sandy Bihn, Kathleen Heideman, Wes King aide to Senator Sherrod Brown from Ohio, Alexis Smith, and Jamie Cross

Great Lakes Day Highlights Critical Threats to Region

Freshwater Future staff and community leaders met with elected officials in D.C. this spring to share stories from across the region. Kathleen Heideman, board member of Mining Action Group discussed destructive cumulative impacts of the increased mining pressures around Lake Superior. Sandy Bihn of Lake Erie Waterkeeper pushed for nutrient source reduction associated with Lake Erie's devastating Harmful Algal Blooms. Jaime Cross, lifelong advocate for the Great Lakes informed officials about the need to protect and enhance public access when cleaning up the Great Lakes' Areas of Concern.

Experts and Advocates Convene to Combat CAFO and HABS Threats

Freshwater Future in partnership with Lake Erie Waterkeeper hosted the Great Lakes CAFO + HABS Conference in Toledo, Ohio in early May. Advocates from all over the region networked and discussed how CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) and manure runoff are significant contributors of nutrient pollution leading to harmful algal blooms. Attendees enjoyed networking, a CAFO site bus tour and dinner aboard the Sandpiper boat.

Interested in being part of the CAFO and HABS network? Sign up here:

freshwaterfuture.org/2024-great-lakes-cafo-habs-conference



THANK YOU SUMMER INTERNS!



Josh Heupel

This summer, Josh is researching policies in the Great Lakes region related to privatization of water utilities. Josh is a Master in Public Affairs candidate specializing in domestic environmental policy at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs. He holds a B.S. in Agricultural Business/Economics and a B.A. in Political Science from Fresno State. Josh is a current Environmental Fellow with the Yale School of the Environment and co-chairs Princeton's Environmental Policy Associates organization. His research has delved into water rights, pesticide use regulation, sustainable land use, and ensuring equitable access to water for majority-migrant communities.



Ava Fink

Ava Fink is focusing on mining policy as well as helping to create stories that highlight successes of community groups to protect drinking and surface waters around the Great Lakes. Ava will be in her junior year at the College of Wooster. She is an Environmental Studies and Political Science double major and is the president of the College of Wooster Democrats and secretary for her college's Sexual Respect Coalition. As a member of her College Marching and Concert Band, Ava plays the Mellophone and the French Horn. Ava is interested in how state and federal policies affect sustainability and residents' views and understanding of sustainability.

Freshwater Voices is a joint production of Freshwater Future, a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization and Freshwater Future Canada, a registered Canadian charity.

STAFF

ALANA HONAKER
Grants & Community Program Associate
alana@freshwaterfuture.org
ALEXIS SMITH
Program Co-Director
alexis@freshwaterfuture.org
ANN BAUGHMAN
Associate Director
ann@freshwaterfuture.org
ANNA BUNTING
Program Co-Director
anna@freshwaterfuture.org
HILLARD HAMPTON
Associate Director for Urban Partnerships
hillard@freshwaterfuture.org
JILL RYAN
Executive Director
jill@freshwaterfuture.org
KRISTEN HAITAIAN
Program Co-Director
kristen@freshwaterfuture.org
KWAMÉ HAMPTON
Community Program Coordinator
kwame@freshwaterfuture.org
LAURIE BREIGHNER
Grants and Administrative Specialist
laurie@freshwaterfuture.org
LESLIE BURK
Communications & Development Director
leslie@freshwaterfuture.org
LISA ROSS
Database Manager
lisa@freshwaterfuture.org
STEPHANIE ALTROCK
Accounting Director
stephanie@freshwaterfuture.org

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2024 GRANT RECIPIENTS

Freshwater Future is proud to support the following organizations:

Spring Project Grants

Blue Fish Canada
Bridges//Puentes Justice Collective of the Southeast
Bright Neighborhood Community Development Corporation
Capital Area Friends of the Environment
Citizens for a Safe & Clean Lake Superior
Families Reclaiming Our Environment
Michigan Hydro Relicensing Coalition
Oscoda Citizens for Clean Water/ Need Our Water
Sterling Water Stewards
Superior Rivers Watershed Association
WaterLegacy
Yellow Dog Watershed Preserve

Communications Grants

Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper
Center for Neighborhood Technology
Clinton River Watershed Council
Illinois Environmental Council
Keep Toledo/Lucas County Beautiful
River Network

Special Opportunity Grants

Benton Harbor Community Water Council
Bright Neighborhood Community Development Corporation
Clean Water Action
Council of Northeast Wisconsin
Glengerry Trappers Council
Great Lakes Water Protector Network
No Senior Left Behind
Wellington Water Watchers
Wisdom Institute

Your mission is our mission
2024 GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

Freshwater Future's Fall Project Grant Programs provide financial support for activities led by community groups working to promote drinking water, river, lake, shoreline, wetland, and groundwater protection in the Great Lakes Basin through grassroots advocacy efforts.

2024 FALL Q&A WEBINAR
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12TH
12-1 PM ET

Informational webinars are offered prior to Project Grant deadlines to provide Q&A on our funding opportunities. Scan the QR code for more information and to register.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:
freshwaterfuture.org/grant-programs

Awards ranging from \$500 to \$5,000 (USD) for grassroots project expenses and activities.

APPLY TODAY!

Application Deadline: September 30, 2024



THANK YOU to All of Our Donors

April 1 - July 20, 2024

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William Neal
Lawrence Tucker
Larry Walls

Flint Community Lab

Janet Goldwasser and Stu Dowty *In Memory of Dr. Bunyan Bryant*
United Way of Genesee County

Water Is Life Festival

Bay Mills Indian Community
Michigan Environmental Council
Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition
North Central Michigan College
Northern Michigan Environmental Action Council (NMEAC)
Odawa Casino Resort

Organizations

Blue Mountain Watershed Trust Foundation
Cayuga Lake Watershed Network
Center for Regenerative Community Solutions/
Possible Rochester
Chicago Water Alliance
Families Reclaiming Our Environment (FROE)
Finger Lakes Regional Watershed Alliance
Great Lakes Water Protector Network
Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation
Saugatuck Dunes Coastal Alliance
Talking Rivers, Inc.
Upper Peninsula Environmental Coalition
We the People of Detroit
White River Watershed Partnership

Volunteers

Nancy Staley
Peggy Swenor

THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING FRESHWATER FUTURE'S WONDERS OF THE GREAT LAKES AUCTION!

The Wonders of the Great Lakes Auction raised nearly \$3,000 to support Freshwater Future's work! Thanks to everyone who participated and we hope the winning bidders enjoy their gear, trips, and gifts! None of this would have been possible without the generous donations from the following amazing businesses and organizations!



American Spoon
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**DONATE TODAY TO
ENSURE THE HEALTHY
FUTURE OF OUR WATERS!**



Donate today, and you will be helping to protect clean water, champion environmental justice, and solve the biggest threats facing our waters. Every donation will support Freshwater Future's work to ensure our waters in the Great Lakes region are clean and safe from source to tap.

**Together, we can make a difference in the movement
towards a healthier and more vital Great Lakes region.**

FRESHWATER FUTURE
PO Box 2479
Petoskey, MI 49770
Phone: (231) 348-8200
freshwaterfuture.org

FRESHWATER FUTURE CANADA
PO Box 1442-STN Main
Guelph, ON N1H 6N9
freshwaterfuturecanada.ca

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