



Dedicated to the care & enjoyment of our water resources

Lower Sugar River Watershed Association 2013-2017 Strategic Plan

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The Watershed

The Sugar River Watershed is divided geographically into upper, middle, and lower reaches, encompassing nearly 487,000 acres in south-central Wisconsin and northern Illinois. It is largely an agricultural watershed with over 80% of the basin in pasture hay and row crop production. Millennia of human occupation and land management using fire shaped this landscape before recent European settlement. Historically, the landscape was characterized by vast stretches of savanna, prairie, and barrens that occupied the broad sandy glacial outwash plain and surrounding hills. Our watershed also includes the eastern edge of the Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin, characterized by dramatic limestone and older sandstone outcroppings, adding to the rich biological diversity of the basin.

In the Lower Sugar River Watershed alone, over 7,000 acres of restored and protected lands provide flood protection, wildlife habitat, and water quality benefits in and downstream of the watershed, as well as hunting, fishing, trapping and other outdoor recreation opportunities. Of the hundreds of miles of streams and rivers that drain the Sugar River basin, several reaches are considered Outstanding or Exceptional Resource Waters, which are higher quality stream environments containing rare fishes and other aquatic life forms. An example in the LSRW is Sylvester Creek, which is listed as a Class III Trout Stream. Three streams in the LSRW are classified as Impaired Waters under the Clean Water Act Section 303(d), due to excessive sediment and nutrient loading. Impaired waters do not meet water quality standards and may not support fishing, swimming, recreating or public health and welfare.

The Organization

The Lower Sugar River Watershed Association (LSRWA) is a non-profit, grassroots organization dedicated to empowering citizens with experience and knowledge to steward land and water resources in the Lower Sugar River Watershed. Formed in 2011, in partnership with its long established sister organization the Upper Sugar River Watershed Association (USRWA), LSRWA was created for people who care about and enjoy the Sugar River and the rich, productive landscapes of Southern Wisconsin and Northern Illinois. The rolling hills and valleys that surround the river and its tributary

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streams form our watershed and connect us to each other and to the land. The natural assets of our watershed—the deep agricultural soils, forest and wetland habitats, aquatic environments, and wildlife—sustain our lives, and are integral to our regional economy and culture. We believe these assets benefit from our watershed community’s collective stewardship, now and into the future. We all have a stake in abundant and high quality water resources.

Beginning with the organization’s public kick-off event in early 2011, LSRWA has made significant strides in establishing and building its organizational capacity and public support through the following efforts:

- **Public Outreach, Education, and Partnership-Building:** Conducted “Get-to-Know-Your-Watershed” events to showcase the natural resource assets of the area through maps, presentations, and field outings, and sponsored regular public forums to introduce and learn about the work of other key watershed partners. In 2013, we held a workshop on restoring impaired streams and organized our first major fund raiser and membership campaign with *Seasons of the Sugar River—Inaugural Juried Art Exhibit & Benefit*, which featured science and map exhibits created by volunteers and collaborating schools. In 2014, we will initiate an annual Conservation on the Farm event to feature producers in the watershed who contribute to water resource protection through Best Management Practices.
- **Citizen Science Programming:** Trained over 100 adult and student volunteers to undertake a Watershed Rapid Assessment Survey to “take the pulse of the watershed”, as part of initial steps in developing a watershed plan and starting a conversation with landowners and others in the watershed about resource concerns and stewardship opportunities. We have further expanded our data collection efforts by collaborating with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and UW-Extension in their Water Action Volunteer (WAV) program, to train local students and volunteers to measure and document a number of stream chemistry and habitat quality parameters. This information is available to the public, to provide a measure of ecosystem health throughout the watershed.
- **Invasive Species Management:** Conducted, in a public/private partnership, an Early Detection Rapid Response effort to eradicate water celery (*Oenanthe javanica*), a new aquatic invasive species in WI discovered in the Sugar River floodplain. This effort will eventually be expanded into a watershed-wide invasive species monitoring and control program.
- **Organization Development:** Established a volunteer board of directors and four action teams (Organization, Science/Technical, Education/Outreach, and Grant Writing). Hired a part-time Program Coordinator. We are upgrading our website to improve member, partner, and public outreach.
- **Grant Awards:** Received three Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) River Planning Grants (2011, 2012, and 2013) to build capacity and outreach of the organization and to begin the watershed planning process, a WDNR Citizen-Based Monitoring Partnership Program grant (2012) to support volunteer training for conducting water quality sampling, and a Wisconsin Environmental Education Board grant with multiple watershed partners (2013-2014) to support project based curriculum development with local schools.
- **Partner Initiatives:** Encouraged partners in the watershed to adopt and initiate local projects in their subwatershed neighborhoods. To date, several partners have formally adopted their subwatersheds to address water quality issues and opportunities: Grade Cheese and the Juda School District in the North

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Fork Juda Branch (NFJB) and Decatur Lake Mill Race Association and local landowners in the Searles Creek basin.

- **School Outreach:** Worked with local schools and teachers to “bring the watershed into the classroom”. With the Juda School District, we acquired WEEB grant funding and the support of collaborating partners and local landowners to undertake an ambitious project to develop a watershed curriculum around a student-designed stream restoration project. The project creates an outdoor laboratory where students can implement and monitor best management practices in demonstration test plots to achieve improved water quality. Teachers and students of the Monroe School District recently participated in the *Seasons of the Sugar River Art Show*, bringing more than 200 Monroe Middle School 6th graders to the show to photo document and record their observations and interpretations on their iPads to raise community awareness of the Lower Sugar River Watershed and the Association's efforts. LSRWA science exhibits have been presented at the Monroe Middle School Science Fair attended by over 600 students, and at the World Soils Day at the Juda School. Several schools have been involved in early watershed assessment sampling, including Durand, Juda, and Monroe students and teachers.

In the fall of 2012, LSRWA initiated a planning process, facilitated by Allison Werner of River Alliance of Wisconsin, to develop a long-term vision for the organization, resulting in the development of this five-year strategic plan that will be used to effectively implement our vision. This process engaged board members, action team leads and members, strategic partners and advisors, and key constituent groups. Input gathered at previous public events and brainstorming sessions during 2011 was also incorporated into the planning process.

Vision

The Lower Sugar River Watershed Association (LSRWA) is a center of information about the ecology, economy, and culture within the Lower Sugar River Watershed. By engaging the public in data collection, hands-on conservation projects, and open forums, we encourage citizens to practice good stewardship, enhancing the quality of life for all who live, work, and play within the watershed.

Mission

The Lower Sugar River Watershed Association brings people together in an open exchange, empowering all with experience and knowledge to steward land and water resources for the benefit and enjoyment of our communities, today and for generations to come.

Core Principles

Watershed: We will work within upland, wetland, riparian, and stream ecosystems in the Lower Sugar River watershed.

Partnerships: Our goals will be accomplished in cooperation with others working in the watershed.

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Inclusivity: Participation of diverse stakeholders and citizens strengthens our work.

Stewardship: We will foster good stewardship, ensuring the health of the watershed for future generations.

Science: Our work is guided by science.

Balance: Our work will balance the needs of all living things - humans, wildlife and plants.

Respect: We will respect all views and opinions.

Excellence: We commit to excellence with passion and determination.

Goals

1. Organizational Capacity:

- A. Develop and maintain the financial capacity and human resources necessary to accomplish our mission.
- B. Articulate and amplify our mission, vision, and goals through a communications plan.
- C. Be a well-known, trusted resource and partner in the Lower Sugar River Watershed.
- D. Develop board effectiveness through training opportunities.

2. Watershed Assessment, Planning and Implementation:

- A. Water and habitat quality—evaluate all 13 sub-watersheds and prioritize areas for implementation of land-use and stormwater management practices to improve ecosystem health and water quality.
- B. Invasive species—develop programming to address invasive species throughout the watershed
- C. Partner resources—identify local and regional organizations and landowners making conservation investments and implementing projects and programming in the watershed.

3. Education and Outreach:

- A. Empower the watershed community to take action and make decisions about their environment by providing access to information and experiences.
- B. Demonstrate that best management practices are cost effective ways to improve water quality.

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