

2023 ARKANSAS-RED RIVER WORKSHOP NEWSLETTER

Uniting people, land and water across 31 states
America's
WATERSHED Initiative >>



INTRODUCTION

Our goal in developing a next-generation Mississippi River Watershed Report Card is to provide decision makers, watershed leaders and the public with easy-to-understand information about the state of the watershed's health, which will motivate and support them in developing a collaborative approach to managing America's largest and most environmentally and economically significant watershed.

In 2021, we paused to consider the influence of our first two report cards and how we might re-envision the report card and design process for an even greater impact in the basin. To do this, we censused more than 150 stakeholders about how to approach the next iteration of the report card. Based on these recommendations, we have identified two key improvements: goal-oriented indicators that not only tell us where we are, but help inform where we want to go, and incorporation of actionable plans to "raise the grade." To this end, we held two workshops in Oklahoma City to explore these avenues in two focus topics, Transportation and Flow Management.



AMERICA'S WATERSHED INITIATIVE

America's Watershed Initiative (AWI) is made up of public, private and nonprofit leaders working together voluntarily to improve the health of the Mississippi River Watershed by informing, advocating, and leveraging improved decision-making about the watershed's natural resources. Our Initiative is built upon support and guidance from industry and commerce, conservation, local communities, government, and academia.

The only organization working across the Mississippi River basin and across all sectors, AWI delivers scientifically sound information and promotes integrated planning. Originally incubated under the umbrella of The Nature Conservancy, AWI incorporated in 2018.

REPORT CARD INTEGRATION

The vision for the next generation of Mississippi River Watershed Report Cards includes a process for examining specific topics in great detail. Similarly, future report cards will integrate results that are generated at the scale of the river basins. These more detailed results will then be integrated into the overall Mississippi River Watershed Report Card. This approach will generate in-depth analyses of issues that are relevant at the scale of the five river basins. The workshops on Transportation and Flow Management in Oklahoma City were intended to begin piloting this approach. By examining the vision and priorities for these two issues, stakeholders created a clear set of priorities that are relevant for the Arkansas and Red River Basins.

TRANSPORTATION



The Arkansas and Red Rivers provide a valuable transportation network that supports the movement of goods, stimulates economic growth, and benefits various industries and communities in the region. Their role in transportation contributes to the economic well-being of the areas they serve and the broader national transportation system. Here are some key takeaways from the workshop:

VALUES OF NAVIGATION

Stakeholders recognize the importance of waterways for transportation and recreation. Consistent flow and water quality are vital for maintaining river health. Supporting habitats and restoration efforts are critical for conservation. These values reflect a holistic approach to river management.

THREATS

Stakeholders also identified several threats that need to be addressed for the sustainability of these rivers. The major challenges include aging infrastructure, lack of funding for maintenance, insufficient awareness about navigation systems and their needs among policymakers and the public, environmental changes, and inadequate data (e.g. tonnage transported and value of commodities). Effective communication and public education on ecological health and watershed complexity are crucial to tackle these threats. The workshop participants emphasized the need for adequate funding, and maintenance of locks, dams, and other infrastructure. The issues of data inadequacy and environmental threats require comprehensive research and analysis to make informed decisions and ensure the sustainability of these rivers.

ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

Stakeholders identified key actions to address lack of data and improve education and public awareness:

- **Develop a standardized real-time data collection system** for accurate and up-to-date information on river conditions and usage. This will support informed decision-making and sustainable waterway management.
- **Collaborate and share data** to break down silos and promote a holistic approach to river data. This will encourage knowledge exchange and transparency, benefiting public awareness and decision support.
- **Set clear goals** for improving data quality and accessibility to guide the establishment of robust data management practices.

- **Create user-friendly apps** and dashboards to improve accessibility and engagement with river-related information, empowering individuals to better understand its significance.
- **Promote education and outreach** by partnering with agencies, organizations, and industry stakeholders to enhance public awareness of the rivers' significance and importance. Collaborative efforts will help convey their value and role in the region's ecology and economy.

These proposed mechanisms of action aim to improve knowledge and public awareness about the importance of inland navigation in the Arkansas and Red Rivers basin. By addressing these challenges, stakeholders can work towards the sustainable management and preservation of these vital waterways.



Stakeholders at the workshop organized values and threats into actionable categories.



FLOW MANAGEMENT

The stakeholder workshop on Flood Control and Flow Management in the Arkansas and Red Rivers Basin revealed a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges and opportunities in the region. Here are some of the key outcomes:

VISION FOR FLOOD MANAGEMENT

Stakeholders seek to develop a comprehensive system to effectively manage high and low water flows while safeguarding communities from flooding. The vision prioritizes holistic watershed management, data-driven decision-making, ecological preservation, and integrating natural systems with modern infrastructure. It recognizes the importance of water quality and emphasizes the need for secure funding to support these goals.

BARRIERS IDENTIFIED

The biggest challenge identified by stakeholders is the lack of funding. Without adequate financial resources, stakeholders find it difficult to initiate and implement necessary actions. Plans for flow management need to account for agricultural, industrial, environmental, and community needs. Balancing these competing priorities while ensuring safety is a complex challenge. There is a lack of coordination between different agencies and stakeholders that hinders the development and implementation of effective strategies. The increasing impact of climate change, including more frequent and severe weather events, presents a significant barrier to flood control and flow management in the basin.

HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT

To advance holistic management and overcome the challenge of competing interests, workshop participants proposed a series of actions that can be taken. These include:

- **Public outreach** through social media, education campaigns, events, and flood preparedness plans to reduce risks and improve preparedness. Public support is crucial to secure funding and implement initiatives.
- **Investing in infrastructure** such as levees, dams, and floodgates, as well as nature-based solutions, and developing comprehensive flood management plans, will help to reduce the impact of floods and improve control mechanisms.
- **Preserving and restoring natural ecosystems**, including wetlands and forests, are vital for enhancing flood control, as these systems can help absorb and filter floodwaters.
- **Water conservation programs**, coupled with education and outreach, incentives, and regulations, are recommended to reduce flood risks and ensure the sustainability of water resources.
- **Improving data collection** and analysis is considered critical for developing more effective flow management and flood control strategies. Data will provide a clearer understanding of water resources and flood risks.



Brainstorming both interventions and potential hurdles helps guide effective change.

Collaboration, public engagement, and a commitment to long-term sustainability will be key to realizing the stakeholders' vision.

CONCLUSION

EXPANDING THE PARTNERSHIP

STEP 1:
DEVELOPING
SHARED VISIONS
FOR THE FUTURE

STEP 2:
ASSESSING
CURRENT
CONDITION

STEP 3:
IDENTIFYING
PRIORITY
ACTIONS

NEXT STEPS

In the coming months, we will be reaching out to others in the Arkansas and Red River Watershed to add their voices to this preliminary product. We plan to organize across the other four sub-basins of the Mississippi, inviting them to participate in this collaborative process. We will also consider communication tools and platforms to make this information easily accessible and simple to update as new information becomes available. As we build on previous work and develop new indicators and goals, the report card process strives to continually expand the network of partners through stakeholder analysis and outreach.

THANK YOU

We're so grateful for the input and enthusiasm of everyone who came to the workshop! Our new approach to developing the next-generation Mississippi River Watershed Report Card is a significant step toward comprehensive and collaborative management of America's largest watershed. By focusing on goal-oriented indicators and actionable plans, stakeholders can make a meaningful impact on the health and sustainability of the Arkansas and Red Rivers.

LEARN MORE

Check out the 2015 and 2020 report cards at AmericasWatershed.org, or reach out to Kim.Lutz@AmericasWatershed.org to get involved. We look forward to hearing from you!



WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Cassandra Caldwell, *Arkansas Waterways Commission*
Lauren Campbell, *Kansas Water Office*
Bill Cauthron, *Oklahoma Water Resources Board*
Tony Clyde, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*
Ronald Graber, *Kansas State University*
Teena Gunter, *Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry*
Joe Large, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*
Lance Phillips, *Oklahoma Water Resources Board*
Richard Rockel, *Kansas Water Office*
Scott Satterthwaite, *Kansas Department of Health and Environment*
Jennifer Sheehan, *Arkansas Game and Fish Commission*
Yohanes Sugeng, *Oklahoma Water Resources Board*

WORKSHOP TEAM

Ann Foo, *University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science*
Heath Kelsey, *University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science*
Kim Lutz, *America's Watershed Initiative*
Vanessa Vargas-Nguyen, *University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science*

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