Annual Report
A recap of our work for our members in 2011
To our members

“In 2012, we’ll keep building a strong foundation of support for protecting Lake Michigan, our rivers and streams, our parks and forests, and the air we breathe.”

Environmental awareness and action are strongest when they begin close to home, rooted in the personal experience of our everyday lives.

That’s the foundation upon which we’ve built Environment Illinois. We start at the ground level, by talking to people, often face-to-face, about the places they know and love. And we give each person an opportunity to make his or her voice heard in a way that can shape decisions that affect the water we drink, the air we breathe and the natural beauty we enjoy and hope to preserve for generations to come.

In 2011, for example, we helped translate concern over Lake Michigan beaches closed due to high bacteria counts into action to convince the EPA to reduce sewage pollution. With our local streams and wetlands lacking protection, we also moved to close loopholes in Clean Water Act enforcement. And when the House of Representatives voted to block the EPA from doing its job to protect Lake Michigan and our rivers and streams, we rallied the public and helped convince the Senate to stop the rollbacks, at least for now.

On another front, we all know there’s too much mercury in the fish we catch and eat. We mobilized thousands to get behind new action to slash mercury pollution from power plants. And while it’s hard for many to get their minds around global warming, we helped thousands easily see the folly of allowing another coal-fired power plant to be built in Illinois.

Of course, there are always too many industries pushing the other way, and too many lawmakers in Springfield and Washington, D.C., who are too willing to help them get their way.

In 2012, we’ll keep building a strong foundation of support for Lake Michigan, our rivers and streams, our parks and forests, and the air we breathe—one that can withstand the attacks by polluting industries and lay the groundwork for more progress.

Your support makes all of this possible. Thank you. Together we’ll build an even sturdier foundation for a cleaner, greener, healthier Illinois.

Sincerely,
Max Muller
Environment Illinois Program Director
Healthy farms

From the first pint of strawberries in June to the last crisp red apple of fall, the abundance of a farmer's market is unrivaled. We should be doing everything we can to encourage healthy food and responsible farming. Unfortunately, the U.S. House recently voted to eliminate a program that supports small, sustainable farms. At the same time, they're continuing to send billions of dollars to the factory farms that pollute our air and foul our lakes with runoff.

A food system fueled by pollution

Though there are 289 local farmers markets across Illinois, we still get most of our food from huge industrial farms that create massive amounts of waste. Environment Illinois has been working to hold these agribusinesses accountable, while giving sustainable farmers the support they need to thrive:

- Our members put pressure on the Environmental Protection Agency to update the Clean Water Act and enforce rules against manure and pesticide runoff from factory farms into nearby streams. This kind of agricultural pollution can cause massive fish kills and make waters unsafe for swimming.


- We called on Congress to support the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food program, which helps public schools and low-income residents gain access to fresh, local produce. When big agribusiness convinced the House of Representatives to vote against continuing the program, we organized a massive email and letter-writing campaign to urge the Senate not to do the same.

Local, sustainably-managed farms avoid the massive manure and pesticide runoff of their industrial counterparts.
Protect Lake Michigan

Whether it’s spending a day south of Chicago at Rainbow Beach or an afternoon sailing up north, we all treasure our time at Lake Michigan. But the lake is subject to increasing threats from toxic dumping, sewage overflows and agricultural runoff pollution, while the invasive Asian carp threatens to replace local fish populations. We’re working to protect Lake Michigan and the rest of our waterways from these threats, and keep our waters clean and beautiful for future generations.
Support rallied to protect Lake Michigan from sewage and dumping

Lake Michigan is threatened by pollution on all fronts. For nearly 40 years, the Clean Water Act has protected the streams and wetlands that feed the Great Lakes and keep them clean. But misguided Supreme Court decisions have called Clean Water Act protections into question for the streams and wetlands that feed the lake. Meanwhile, torrents of untreated sewage flow into Lake Michigan after heavy rains, prompting elevated bacteria levels in the lake and leading to more than 500 beach closings every year.

Thousands of Illinoisans write EPA in support of clean water

A pair of poorly reasoned decisions by the Supreme Court have left more than half of Illinois’ streams without any protection from pollution and overdevelopment. We’ve been working to close these loopholes.

• Last February, we presented EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson with thousands of signatures urging her to protect Illinois’ waters. In April, the EPA announced a plan to restore protections to the small streams that feed our rivers and Lake Michigan.

• Polluters weren’t happy: Corporate agribusiness and mining companies called upon their friends in Congress to pass bills designed to prevent the EPA from taking any action on clean water.

• In Illinois and across America, our field organizers talked to hundreds of thousands of people, urging them to write their local media and officials in support of strong clean water protections. Thanks in part to our public outcry, the Senate voted down the bills introduced by the House. We sent Congress a clear message—our waterways are nobody’s dumping ground.

Another summer of beach closings show need for better sewage standards

Sewage in our waters can be disastrous to the health of humans and wildlife. We have been working to fix the problem by calling for an update to national wastewater treatment standards—and last year, the EPA started planning to do just that.

• Every year, more than 30 billion gallons of sewage are dumped into the Great Lakes, causing elevated levels of unsafe bacteria. In Illinois alone, this contributed to 508 days of beach closings or advisories in 2010.

• The EPA recently announced it would update standards to prevent sewage pollution—but it needs all the support it can get in the face of a hostile Congress. We’re mobilizing thousands of people to contact the EPA in support of the new rules.

The new federal carp czar

The invasive Asian carp wreaks havoc on waters where it has been introduced, starving out native fish populations and even injuring boaters.

After we helped launch an awareness campaign on the Asian carp’s threat to the Great Lakes, the White House responded by appointing a “carp czar” in charge of coordinating action to contain the invasive species.
Clean air, healthy families

We should be able to breathe clean air without worrying about mercury in our bloodstream or soot in our lungs. Yet coal-fired power plants and other industrial polluters spew hundreds of thousands of tons of dangerous pollutants into our atmosphere every year. We need to protect our families’ health by requiring polluters to clean up their act.
Clean air standards will be strengthened despite attacks in Congress

Air pollution has made its way into every part of our lives—our air is sullied with soot and smog, exacerbating asthma and causing respiratory diseases, while mercury pollution contaminates fish in waterways across the country. One out of every 10 women of childbearing age has enough mercury in her body to put a baby at risk of neurological damage. This year, reducing mercury and other air pollution was one of Environment Illinois’ top priorities.

EPA to cut mercury, save 25,000 lives

In 2011, the Environmental Protection Agency moved ahead with efforts to significantly reduce mercury, soot and smog pollution from power plants. We expect these reductions to save more than 25,000 lives every year. We built support across the state to ensure strong standards were adopted:

- In January and April, our national coalition released two reports on the health impacts of smog and mercury pollution. The reports reveal how much pollution is emitted by specific power plants nationwide.

- We partnered with our national coalition of allies to help motivate more than 800,000 people across America to send the EPA public comments in support of strong action on mercury—no other single EPA rule has ever received so much public support.

Congressional attacks on clean air voted down

Unfortunately, polluters and their allies in Congress launched a coordinated attack to block these critical safeguards and other clean air protections. But after rallying thousands of our activists to speak out, lobbying key senators, we held the line against some of the worst attacks:

- In March, the U.S. Senate rejected a bill that would have blocked standards for soot, mercury and carbon pollution.

- In April, our advocacy helped convince the Senate to vote down three other bills that would have blocked the EPA from reducing pollution that causes global warming.
Repower Illinois

Too much of our energy comes from coal, oil and other dirty sources that wreak havoc on our environment. Right now, 97 percent of Illinois’ electricity comes from dirty coal and nuclear power plants. But by using energy more efficiently and tapping Illinois’ vast renewable energy potential, we can start moving toward clean energy sources that don’t pollute and will never run out.

Solar power on the rise in Illinois
While we’ve made great strides in wind power, we still have a long way to go if we are to take full advantage of the sun. Illinois has surprising solar potential—more than Germany or Japan, two of the world’s leading energy producers.

• Last year, the solar energy jobs market grew at 10 times the rate of the rest of the economy.

• In 2010, we helped Illinois pass landmark solar legislation, spurring investment in renewables across the state. And this year, we won a reform on net-metering programs to make it easier for homeowners to invest in solar roofs.

Plug into clean energy
Of course, the cleanest source of power is the energy we don’t use in the first place. We’ve worked hard for efficiency programs that make it easy to cut down on energy usage:

• Our citizen outreach staff directed thousands of people to our online “Plug Into Clean Energy” guide, which provides clear resources and helpful tips on the best ways to start using less energy.

• We pushed the Legislature to make updates to Illinois’ Energy Efficiency Portfolio Standard, which will more than double the energy savings of electric utilities’ efficiency programs.

Five ways to plug into clean energy

1. Replace incandescent light bulbs with CFLs to cut your lighting costs by up to 75 percent.

2. Wash your laundry using cold water only.

3. Plug appliances into power strips, and turn them off when not in use.

4. Put aluminum foil behind radiators to reflect heat back into the room.

5. Scrape—rather than rinse—dishes, and only run the dishwasher when you have a full load.

For the full list, visit www.EnvironmentIllinois.org/center/plug-into-clean-energy
Seattle may have already claimed the name “Emerald City,” but that doesn’t mean Chicago can’t actually be the nation’s greenest. Leading up to Chicago’s first competitive mayoral race in decades, we helped lead a coalition that ensured environmental concerns were front and center. Media all over the city covered our effort to ask each of the top mayoral candidates about Chicago’s most pressing environmental problems.

Coalition pushed Chicago mayoral candidates on environmental issues

In some ways, Chicago is already a true environmental leader. The city’s Climate Action Plan embraces science-based goals for cutting global warming pollution and will put green roofs on 6,000 Chicago buildings by 2020. But in other ways, Chicago is way behind. Two ancient, dirty coal-fired power plants churn out soot in Pilsen and Little Village, while the Chicago river isn’t safe for swimming because it contains untreated sewage effluent.

After Mayor Richard Daley announced he was stepping down in September 2010, Environment Illinois helped mount an effort to make environmental concerns one of the top issues in the race. We asked the mayoral candidates questions like:

- Will you create green jobs by putting solar panels on new buildings?
- Will you support recycling services for all homes and businesses?
- Will you work to shut down dirty coal plants?
- Will you build parks in neighborhoods that lack them?

We posted the answers on our website and invited our members to check them out so they would know where the candidates stood when they voted—and help make Chicago the nation’s real “Emerald City.”