

Mississippi Valley  
CONSERVANCY

# Climate Action Plan

Saving what we cherish, together.

*The earth is what we  
have in common.*

~ Wendell Berry

# Together, we can address one of the greatest challenges our region has ever faced

**W**hat is it about the Driftless area you love? Is it the foggy mornings overlooking the valley? Or going fishing with your family in the spring? Perhaps it's the sounds of migrating sandhill cranes and the call of the spring peepers.

Too often we think of climate change as occurring on a global scale or something that will happen in the future. Yet climate change already is causing profound changes with damaging effects to the land and water you love: wildlife habitat, lakes and streams, and farmland, right here in the Driftless Area, are at risk as never before.



Photo courtesy of Jerry Quebe

*More than 90 species of U.S. specialty crops require pollination, and various animals, including bees, butterflies, moths, bats, and birds are a critical part of the pollinator-plant ecosystem. During the past 30-plus years, our nation's pollinator populations have suffered serious losses, and, according to the USDA, climate change is one of the causes.*

## The challenge before us

That's not to say that the climate hasn't always been changing. It has. The challenge now is that it's changing faster than at any time in history. Global annual average surface temperatures have increased 1.8F from 1885 to 2016 with greater increases in northern latitudes, and we're currently in the warmest period in the history of modern civilization.

You can see it all around you. In recent years, our area, and much of the Midwest, has experienced unprecedented extreme weather including heavy rains, droughts, and hail that have stressed farms, wildlife and communities alike. Over the past 100 years, the severity of our winters has moderated, plant hardiness zones in this region have moved northward, and wildlife ranges are shifting.

Because of the unique, and unusually diverse array of landscapes in the Driftless Area, our region is more vulnerable than you might think. Consider the native habitats which occur at different elevations and with varying sun exposure, including cold water trout stream habitats in coulee ravines. Envision the densely forested hillsides, sunlit prairies, oak savannas, and rocky ridgetops. The ongoing shift in climate is impacting these micro-climates leaving nowhere to go for the species that evolved with them.

### **We can lead on climate change and save what we love**

Cutting emissions from fossil fuels is the most important factor in dealing with climate change, and we address that in this plan. But other actions are also needed to help address climate change.

Did you know that land protection, which is the Conservancy's primary work, also helps greatly in fighting climate change? As our climate changes, and plants and animals are forced to migrate to find new places to seek food and shelter, establishing corridors of interconnected diverse habitats and farmlands is critical for their survival. Yet saving what we love will take more than conserving additional land; climate change requires a holistic approach.

We have an opportunity and a moral obligation to take action. The good news is that everyone can play a role. As a country, and as a conservation organization, we have the knowledge, strategies, and technologies to make the difference we need. That's why we created this plan. We are feeling optimistic, and we look forward to partnering with you.



*Photo courtesy of Brian Ramsey*

*With an increase in the average summer air temperature of just five degrees, models predict that rising stream temperatures could eliminate up to 95% of brook trout habitats.—Wisconsin Pollinators*

## “Natural Climate Solutions” all around us

Conserving and managing land, whether natural areas or agricultural land, is one of the most effective ways to combat the effects of climate change. According to research by The Nature Conservancy and others, the USA’s contribution of these “natural climate solutions” can slow climate change by as much as 21% if we act quickly.



*Protected lands in Wisconsin’s Driftless Area provide the food and shelter that many wildlife species have evolved to depend upon over thousands of years. We depend upon them, too, for the ways in which they protect water, health, beautiful landscapes, and our local economy.*

That’s because deep-rooted trees and prairies help to capture excess CO<sub>2</sub> from the air and store it above ground (in tree biomass) and below ground (in tree and grass roots). Woodlands, prairies, and wetlands also help to protect us from floods and soil loss, as they slow and filter water during the increasingly heavy rains our region is experiencing due to the warming climate. Yet for these natural climate solutions to play the central climate role we need; we must significantly increase the pace of land conservation to ensure haphazard development doesn’t wipe out what matters most.

We need to increase our region’s support to help farmers deploy farming practices that are “climate smart,” including managed grazing systems, soil and water protection strategies, and reduced use of fossil fuels. Often called “regenerative” agriculture, these farming practices help to build soil, hold water, and reduce erosion.

Now, more than ever, we need everyone to join us as we address one of the greatest challenges we have faced while conserving land and water for generations to come. We know it will take an integrated approach. We must transition away from using fossil fuels and simultaneously work to tap the power of natural climate solutions. With your help we can address climate change in a meaningful way.

*The Conservancy's land conservation mission is, and always has been, a climate solution mission. Since 1997, we have worked to conserve lands that are locally and regionally important to our community. Today, those lands and waters are taking on even greater significance as we recognize their role in adding to our country's efforts to protect the lands so important to Wisconsin and our country as a whole.*

### **Our region can be a central part of the solution**

Lands within Trempealeau, Buffalo, Monroe, Jackson, La Crosse, Vernon, Crawford, Richland and Grant counties lie within the extraordinarily unique region known as the Driftless Area.

It may come as no surprise, but the Driftless Area is emerging as one of the key geographical regions in our part of the world that can significantly reduce the impacts of climate change. That means protecting land in the Driftless Area also accomplishes something of immense additional value—it reduces the effects of, and slows down, climate change.

Given the urgency of addressing climate change, we have developed an integrated strategy to address climate change in the Driftless Area in partnership with others who care. As an organization that seeks to incorporate science and community input into the identification and management of lands in critical need of protection, we know the time for action is now.



## Our strategies to fight climate change

This climate action plan furthers the climate protection strategies we've practiced since our founding in 1997. Back then, we recognized the need for an integrated approach. Our programs – including land management policies and practices, invasive species removal, habitat restoration work, farmland and natural land protection, and communications with the public, landowners, and partners – are inherently climate-related strategies to sequester and store carbon, encourage biodiversity, and build resilience to extreme weather events.

That perspective is central to our work given the unprecedented challenges to the lands, waters, and communities we serve – from extreme weather and a rapidly changing climate.

Your involvement in helping to slow down, and adapt to, climate change is central to the success of protecting the places we love and depend upon.



*Photo courtesy of Tom Rhorer*

*Strategic selection of land protection projects allows us to expand protected corridors of native habitats for the wildlife that have depended upon them since before recorded history.*

## Natural Climate Solutions: the heart and soul of our work

Natural climate solutions (NCS) such as preventing deforestation, undertaking “climate smart” farming and forestry practices, and leaving wetlands intact can make a huge impact in addressing the challenge of climate change. These methods, as documented by a highly regarded study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, increased carbon storage and reduced greenhouse gas emissions that are accelerating climate change.

When combined, they could provide 21% of the U.S. greenhouse gas reductions needed by 2030 to stabilize warming to retain a stable climate and avoid large-scale extinction rates. What’s more, farmers and landowners are looking for guidance and support to implement these strategies. **These solutions are cost-effective, and we don’t have to wait for technology to catch up – we can implement many of them right now.**

As a land trust, we are committed to accelerating the implementation of natural climate solutions in the Driftless Area. We are part of a number of initiatives to encourage funding to help landowners and communities manage their woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and agricultural soils to absorb climate-warming gases.

The impact of land and water NCS depends on the timely transition from fossil fuel to compatible renewables, including energy conservation. That’s why this climate action plan takes an integrated approach to help communities throughout the Driftless Area.



*The protected wetlands at Trempealeau Lakes nature preserve are part of a natural complex of backwaters that help prevent flooding in the Mississippi River Valley.*



*Two-thousand oak trees were planted by staff, volunteers, interns, and board members at the Cassville Bluffs nature preserve in Grant County in early 2021. The trees will provide additional habitat for migrating birds as they sequester and store carbon above and below the ground.*

## Ensuring success by supporting and practicing energy conservation

The vast majority of climate and conservation scientists acknowledge that without a rapid shift away from fossil fuels, the very landscapes we are working to conserve, and the places we love, are increasingly at risk. As trees, prairies, farmland, wetlands and the Great Lakes become more stressed by climate change, their ability to absorb the climate-polluting gases diminishes. So too does their resilience to its impact. The National Audubon Society's research shows that two-thirds of North American bird species are at risk of extinction due to our warming planet. They note that birds are telling us there is no time to lose in taking action on climate and conservation.

Given the critical importance of reducing fossil fuels in the near future to slow the damaging impacts on our communities, farms, and wildlife, we recognize we must also become a leader in the clean energy conversation. This is not an unexpected path, as land conservation has always involved thinking in an integrated and creative manner. We are therefore joining other conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, National Audubon Society, and American Farmland Trust to find ways to conserve energy, reduce our collective use of fossil fuels, and promote renewable energy projects that will increase the health of our communities and landscapes and slow climate change.



Photo courtesy of Bruce Bartel

*The National Audubon Society's research shows that two-thirds of North American bird species are at risk of extinction due to our warming planet. They note that birds are telling us there is no time to lose in taking action on climate and conservation. The cerulean warbler is one of many migrating bird species that depend upon the habitats we protect. Habitat protection alone won't save them, however. Reduced use of fossil fuels is essential.*

### **In partnership with others in the Driftless Area, we will also work to:**

- Support and encourage transition from fossil fuels toward renewable energy that is compatible with soil health, farm viability, and our conservation mission and goals. We will do so at the local, regional, and statewide level by advocating for policy development and individual engagement. As part of this effort, our conservation agreements will continue to allow for renewable energy within designated areas of their property, providing landowners the option to reflect their commitment to land conservation and reduce climate change, with compatible renewable energy use.
- Share strategies that are respectful of different economic circumstances so community members, businesses, and organizations can take appropriate action to reduce their climate impact.
- Seek and implement ways to replace our use of fossil fuels as renewable options become available for our operations (including office electricity, vehicles, and equipment for land management activities). Advocate for actions that limit greenhouse gases on a personal level, as well as regionally, nationally, and globally.
- Identify opportunities to help reduce energy use within our own operations and the community at-large. If we use less energy, no matter the kind, it will put less pressure on the natural areas, agricultural lands, and waters that we love. Keep abreast of fossil fuel divestment options. It's the fiscally and ecologically responsible thing to do.



# Accelerating our work with Natural Climate Solutions

Increasing community support and a growing sense of urgency throughout Wisconsin and the Driftless Area have elevated the importance of natural climate solutions. It is imperative we continue to expand our team and diversify our strategies to accelerate land conservation and climate-related management in these ways:

**Strategic land protection.** Enhance our project selection and management criteria to include additional emphasis on projects with the greatest potential to help slow down, or adapt to, climate change.

**Critical wildlife habitat.** Use state-of-the-art data and tools, such as The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool, to identify projects that will help species adapt to changes in habitat brought about by climate change. We are working to increase biodiversity, create wildlife and conservation corridors, and increase carbon sequestration in partnership with local families and communities on a voluntary basis.

**Climate-smart farming strategies.** Identify opportunities for farmers to manage their land for greater resilience to climate change and becoming part of the solution. Examples include sharing success stories and working with partners to provide information and resources for permanent groundcover, rotational grazing, and other techniques for managing land, soil health, water, and farm viability.

**Science-based land management.** Our land restoration procedures seek to maximize the capability to store carbon and improve and maintain habitat diversity for species currently (or anticipated to become) under threat. This includes staying abreast of evolving strategies to manage invasive species and implement site-specific habitat management practices to support healthy wildlife habitat.

**Connecting to local communities.** Whether it's conserving locally important lands, or partnering with community organizations, we know that addressing climate change means ensuring that everyone can experience the climate benefits of land and water.



*Member support and special project grants make it possible for Conservancy staff, interns, and volunteers to restore wildlife habitats for resilience to climate change. As a result, this prairie at Sugar Creek Bluff, a State Natural Area, provides the pollen, nectars, and nesting areas on which an entire community of wildlife depends.*

*The native vegetation of Conservancy lands is a multi-use tool against the hazards of climate change. It protects people and cropland by absorbing floodwaters, removing greenhouse gases from the air, and preserving the networks of plants and animals that build a resilient landscape.*

~ Steve Carpenter, Professor Emeritus  
Center for Limnology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

*Planting “prairie strips” to reduce run-off during heavy rains, absorb greenhouse gases, and provide pollinator habitat, is one of many natural climate solutions that help to protect some croplands in our area.*



*Photo courtesy of Tom Rhorer*

## **Partnerships are more important than ever**

For more than two decades we have assisted local families and communities to conserve their cherished lands—often when it seemed out-of-reach. These partnerships necessitated creative thinking, hard work, deep listening, and testing new solutions. The results are inspiring.

Yet we know this is just the beginning. The success of land conservation, and now the imperative of slowing down and adapting to climate change, is based upon a diversity of partnerships and the commitment to making the seemingly impossible, possible. We'll continue to learn and share; provide educational resource and trainings; create demonstration projects; and test new ideas and approaches.

We now face a time when natural climate solutions and renewable energy can work together to ensure that the Driftless region is healthy, vibrant, and a great place for people and wildlife alike.

Because of you, and others who care, we will be able to foster a community-wide approach where everyone can find a role in making a difference. It won't be easy; achieving amazing results has always taken time and effort. But we know it's possible. That's why we are confident that together, we can support each other in creating the change we need to see.

# Will you join us?

The realities of climate change can feel overwhelming. But we must take action. The good news about the climate crisis is that each of us can help to solve it — we need you. You can help on a variety of fronts, depending on your interests and availability. To get you started, here are some ideas.

**Land conservation.** Do you, or someone you know, want to explore how to conserve land? *We need to triple the pace of conservation to meet the needs of wildlife, farmland, and water protection.* We can clarify federal and state income tax benefits, funding opportunities, estate planning and creative ways to meet your needs.

**Land restoration.** Come help out, see us in action, or we can connect you to respected resources focusing on land restoration and climate management techniques for your own land. We will share related funding opportunities when we hear about them.

**Help fund the change.** Your donations of land, in-kind services, and other charitable gifts are critical for our success. In addition to establishing new community nature preserves, you'll be supporting habitat restoration, community access, and the long-term care of the land.

**Participate in educational programs and volunteer.** You can be the change and have a great time at the same time. Our programs vary season to season and include fire management, habitat restoration, and connecting kids to the land. We need people like you to volunteer, whether it's helping to care for our nature preserves, lead programs, or assist in spreading the word.

## **Talk about why addressing climate change is important to you.**

One of the most effective ways to address climate change is to talk about why it matters to you. We are looking for personal stories about the changes you see, your hopes for the future, and how you are taking action.

**Reduce your personal, or community, climate footprint.** You might find that composting (which reduces methane), eating local or growing your own food (reducing the need for packaging and shipping), or switching out your appliances and vehicles to more efficient ones are ways in which you can make a difference right away. Purchasing power from renewable sources is also strategic and can save you money.

**Brainstorm about solutions.** We look forward to building partnerships that can help focus and amplify our collective efforts to inspire climate action. We'd love to hear your ideas.



*Naturehood Connections, our family-friendly volunteer program, makes stewardship activities accessible and rewarding for everyone.*

*What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.*

~ Dr. Jane Goodall, Scientist



Mississippi Valley Conservancy employees

## Our pledge to you

We are on a journey that will necessitate continued learning, partnerships, and new solutions. Because climate change is integrated into almost every aspect of our lives, and that of the lands and waters around us, this is not an approach that allows us to think in isolation or in silos.

This work is ongoing, with urgency and clarity. We will be looking for ways to partner with community members and local, regional, statewide, and national organizations. As new science and technologies emerge, and as we grow our capacity to accelerate our land trust's efforts to address climate change, our climate action plan will be updated accordingly. We will continue to monitor the latest research in climate science and strategies to address climate in the Driftless Area. Simultaneously, our team will look for opportunities to assist local families and communities to increase the pace of land protection, foster biodiversity and regenerative agriculture, and conserve lands critical for wildlife and community health and well-being.

The framework established within this climate action plan is therefore incorporated into our organization's work and priorities. We see it as woven into our commitment to building and supporting lasting relationships with people and the land.

Sue Dillenbeck  
Board President

Carol Abramanzon  
Executive Director

### About Mississippi Valley Conservancy



Founded in 1997, Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a nationally accredited regional land trust that has permanently protected thousands of acres of scenic lands in southwestern Wisconsin by working with landowners, businesses and local communities on voluntary conservation projects. The focus of the Conservancy is to conserve the forests, prairies, wetlands, streams and farms that support native wildlife and enrich communities, for the health and well-being of current and future generations. Learn more about programs, services, events, volunteer opportunities, and membership at:

[www.MississippiValleyConservancy.org](http://www.MississippiValleyConservancy.org)