



THE POWER OF OUR NETWORK

2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

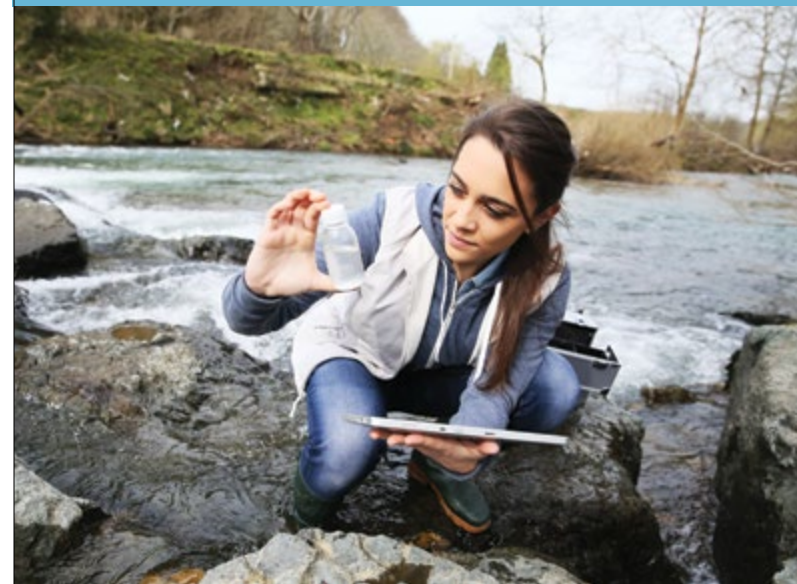
For 30 years, River Network has worked with determination and purpose to become the foremost national organization connecting, empowering, and expanding the efforts of thousands of individuals, groups, and coalitions who work on river conservation and water equity across the United States.

As we look forward to the next five years, our role as a backbone organization for this network remains paramount. Yet we can do more to welcome and encourage everyone—any individual, group, institution, or business invested in championing healthy rivers and clean water—to connect, learn, and grow individual and collective impact.

The potential strength of nearly 6,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in protecting our waters at the local level, and countless businesses and individuals who care about clean water and healthy rivers is enormous. Over the next five years, River Network will increase the power of our network by significantly growing connectivity, leveraging voices from across our network, and strengthening the network's influence by aligning and empowering collective action on key issues. Our leadership in this space will encourage forward progress together.

Acknowledgments

We deeply appreciate the engagement of River Network staff, board members, advisors, members, funders, partners, and others in the development of this plan. Through surveys, interviews, and targeted discussions, approximately 250 people contributed to this plan. We are particularly grateful to Brad Webb and his skillful leadership in guiding the strategic planning process.





MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

Approximately 6,000 NGOs and tens of thousands of individuals protect and restore rivers and safeguard clean water across the United States. These champions are on the scene when rivers run dry, become contaminated, or pose a threat to homes and livelihoods. Their voices and tireless dedication are essential to creating a future in which our communities thrive and value their local rivers and lakes; in which people and businesses use water sustainably; and where all people have access to clean and affordable drinking water and opportunities to enjoy rivers.

When united, like the watersheds and waters they protect, efforts by these water champions form groundswells. When properly resourced and connected—like rivers—groups and individuals create powerful movements. But without resources, training, and peer support, their determination and hard work can falter and fade.

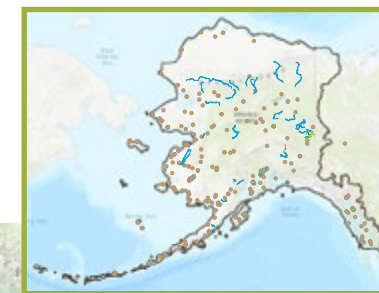
River Network connects local water champions and empowers organizations and individuals with the tools, training, and resources needed for success. By uniting peers and linking them with agencies, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and businesses who can fuel and further their work, our network aligns for collective action and, ultimately, expands impact.



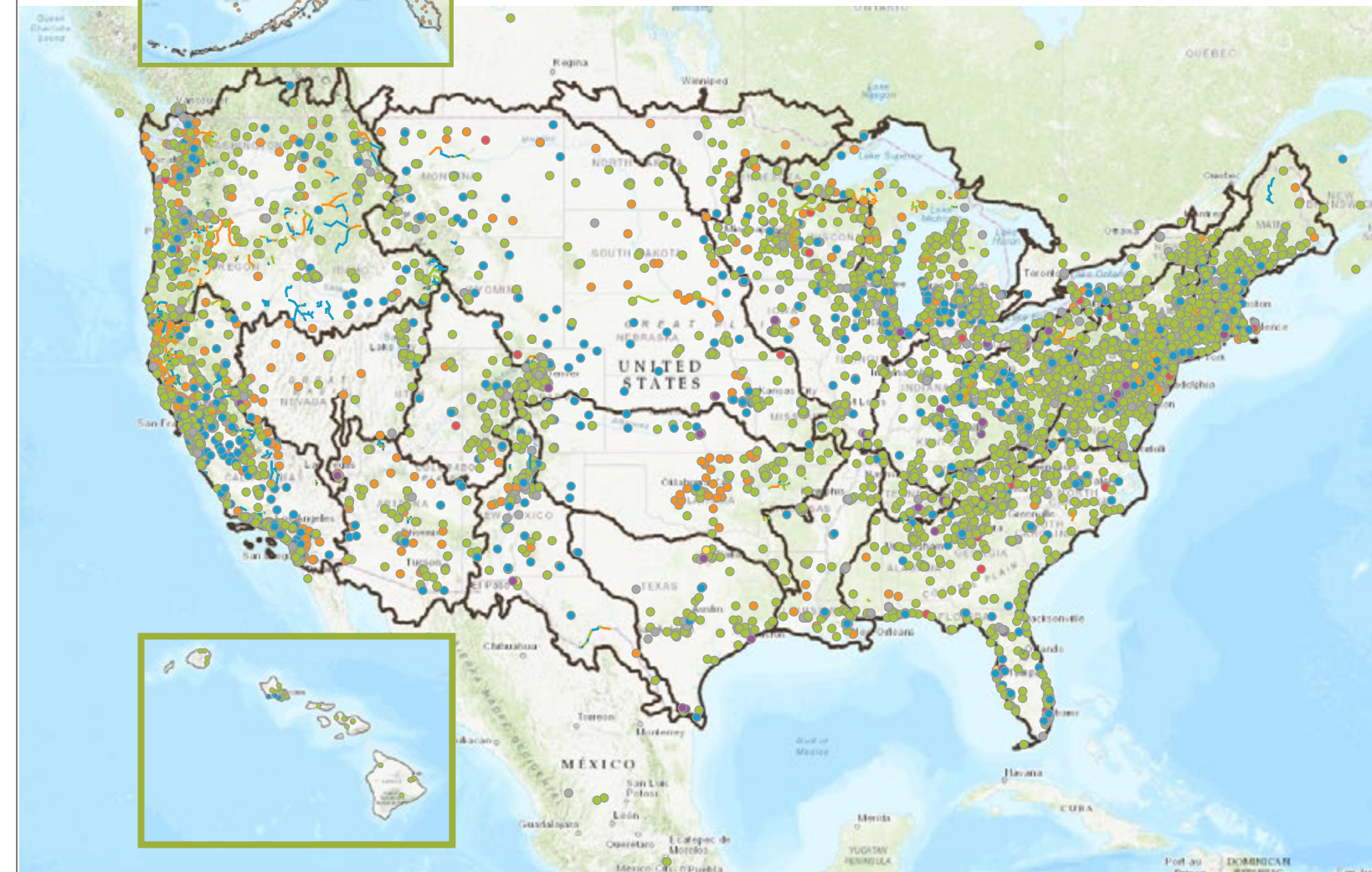
A future with clean water and healthy rivers requires more people working together from all sectors.

Over the next five years, River Network will continue to support and connect on-the-ground champions in communities across the country. Our capacity-building efforts remain paramount, to strengthen groups and enable courageous leaders to tackle water quality and water security challenges through science, policy, civic engagement, and organizational excellence.

This plan expands our work and benefits to members by significantly growing our network, leveraging our voices, and strengthening the network's influence on key issues, guided by River Network's [core values](#) and [principles for equitable and inclusive work](#). We seek a future where the benefits of healthy rivers and clean water are shared by all.



NEARLY 6,000 GROUPS PROTECT AND RESTORE RIVERS AND WATER ACROSS THE U.S.



River Network is the foremost nonprofit connecting water-focused organizations, agencies, businesses, and communities for greater local impact and healthier rivers across the U.S.



OUR JOURNEY & OUR ROLE

For 30 years, River Network has been at the forefront of water protection and restoration, giving people and communities tools to take a stand for their waters. We have recognized the urgency and taken steps to build a more inclusive and diverse river conservation and water community.

As the social and political context of water has shifted over the last three decades, so has River Network's business model. Our focus has expanded from helping local river and watershed organizations meet their challenges to supporting coalitions and partnerships to grow their influence and collective impact. Once funded primarily by land transactions, River Network now has diverse support from foundations, corporate partnerships, government contracts, and individual donors.

VISION AND MISSION:

River Network envisions a future of clean and ample water for people and nature, where local caretakers are well-equipped, effective, and courageous champions for our rivers. To achieve this vision, River Network empowers and unites people and communities to protect and restore rivers and other waters that sustain all life.

River Network creates a big tent. Any individual, group, institution, or business invested in championing healthy rivers and clean water can join the network and is encouraged to support local efforts and the network.

Three years ago, our strategic plan identified three areas fundamental to healthy rivers across our country. These will continue to shape our work:

STRONG CHAMPIONS

Strengthen coalitions, organizations, and leaders

CLEAN WATER

Promote clean water solutions and innovations

AMPLE WATER

Advance water supply security and sustainability

During this three-year period, River Network improved internal systems and accountability. We doubled our net worth, enabling us to significantly expand the number of individuals, groups, and coalitions we support (for more details, see River Network's last three [Annual Reports](#)). We have many accomplishments to celebrate, and yet we recognize the challenges and hard work ahead to unlock the power of the network for greater economic, social, and policy influence and impact. River Network is well positioned to leverage prior success and current assets to make this greater vision a reality.





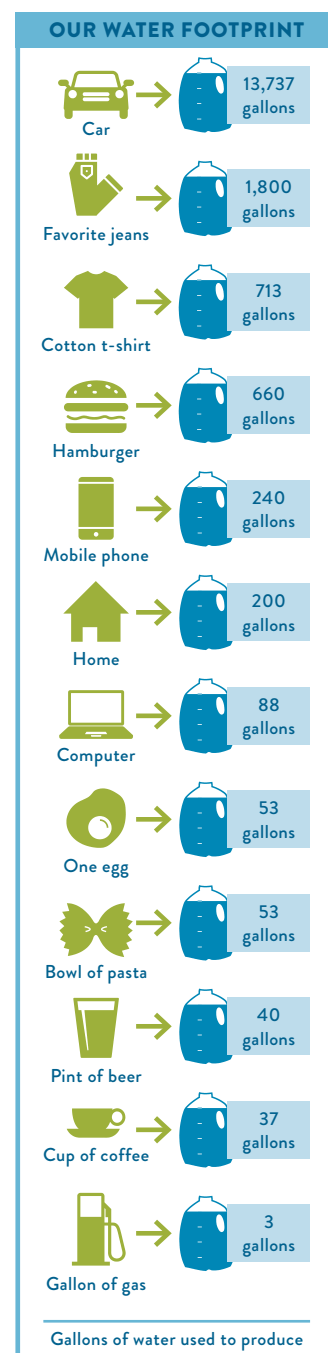
WATER IN CRISIS & OUR RESPONSE

We are facing a water crisis in the United States, a crisis that includes issues of security, affordability, quality, and access. **Over a third of Americans are at risk of losing affordable drinking water,**ⁱ and both flood riskⁱⁱ and droughtⁱⁱⁱ contribute to social and economic insecurity. **More than half of our rivers remain in poor health**^{iv} and climate change will exacerbate many of these problems. This crisis disproportionately impacts people of color and those with limited economic resources.^v Recent events and trends in the United States illustrate that not everyone has equal access to clean and affordable water, equal protection from the risks and impacts of flooding and drought, or equal opportunity to recreate in our rivers.^{vi}

The water crisis we face today is also the result of expanding demand for water in our daily lives. Consider how much water is used by a single person to wash, bathe, drink, and perform everyday household tasks. Although total per capita water use has gone down in recent decades, the amount of virtual water in our daily lives has expanded significantly as a result of the goods and services we depend upon. These factors have pushed the average American's water footprint to 2,200 gallons/day.^{vii}

To move beyond crisis, we must work together across all sectors (agriculture, municipal, industry, energy, recreation, and conservation) to define a different path forward. We need to seek solutions that protect and restore lands where waters flow through, that increase the reliability of natural and built infrastructures that carry water to homes and businesses and back to waterways, and that support other economic and societal goals. We must work within the context of the natural and manmade systems—and the federal, state, and local laws, policies, and practices that dictate how we share, use, and treat water on a daily basis—that connect rural landscapes and cities, support our industries (including a multi-billion dollar recreation industry), and affect every aspect of our lives.

Our response to this crisis includes aligning our network around the Key Issues identified on the next page. **The actions we take will be defined in collaboration with our network of local leaders because we believe the greatest hope for progress exists at the local level.** Although decisions that impact water happen at all levels, local groups are uniquely positioned to address and influence the interdependent factors that impact water availability, quality, and affordability. **Over 90% of infrastructure investments in water supply and wastewater systems happen at the local level.** Environmental harm occurs and is felt first at the local level. As innovative, local solutions emerge, they can be scaled and help drive change at state and national levels. When connected and aligned for shared action, the strength of 6,000 groups and countless businesses and individuals is enormous. This vision drives us to do more to expand, connect, and empower our network than ever before.



KEY ISSUES

Numerous issues call for urgent collective action, but four have risen to the top based on our network-wide engagement for this strategic plan; the timeliness of the issue; alignment with our existing work; opportunity to engage a wider audience and to make a difference; intersection with issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion; and potential for attracting new sources of funding.



CLEAN, SAFE, AFFORDABLE DRINKING WATER

We will grow network-wide fluency and build new tools that enhance the capacity of organizations to support equitable access to clean, safe, and affordable drinking water at the local level, including protecting dependable source waters, insuring effective water treatment, and providing reliable delivery. Today, some 13.8 million U.S. households (almost 12%) face unaffordable water bills while water utilities struggle to fund maintenance or replacement of aging pipes. Drinking water may not be as safe as generations of Americans have come to expect (e.g., consider contamination events in [Flint, MI](#), [Toledo, OH](#), [Charleston, WV](#), and the [San Joaquin Valley in CA](#)). Rivers provide two-thirds of our national drinking water supply, and groundwater makes up the rest. Tackling this issue will involve both urban and rural engagement.



RESILIENT CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

We will grow network-wide fluency and build new tools to enhance the capacity of organizations to work with local water utilities and local government officials to promote community resilience and emergency response as well as river health, incorporating advocating for equity in local decision-making. [With over 12% of the US population exposed to flood risk](#), including nearly 170 coastal U.S. communities reaching or exceeding the threshold for [chronic inundation by 2035](#), and a community's most vulnerable members often the hardest hit and slowest to recover from disasters, now is the time to make forward progress toward greater resiliency. Drought is no less of a threat, accounting for [annual losses nearing \\$9 billion per year](#) in the U.S. Resilient communities can anticipate risk, limit impact, and recover quickly from disaster, minimizing harm to people, local economies, and the natural environment.



HEALTHY RIVERS IN AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES

We will unite river and watershed conservation groups and water advocacy organizations with farmers and ranchers to achieve healthy rivers in agricultural landscapes and look for opportunities to scale or replicate practical approaches from local successes. Farmers and ranchers are essential partners in building a thriving agricultural sector that also supports clean water and healthy rivers. Farms, ranches, and rangeland occupy roughly 44% of U.S. land. They consume approximately 80% of water and are a leading cause of river and lake [water quality impairment](#) and unsustainable water depletion from our rivers and groundwater when improperly managed. Achieving healthy rivers in agricultural landscapes involves bringing the conservation and agricultural interests together to build trust and foster innovation.



ROBUST AND EFFECTIVE WATER LAWS AND POLICIES

We will align our network to support strong and effective protections for clean water and healthy rivers at local, state, and federal levels. Such laws and policies are vital to protecting our rivers and waters, and collectively provide the backbone of our water management framework. When well-crafted, enforced, and fully funded, these policies safeguard our rivers and drinking water. Empowering citizens, organizations, and governments to protect, strengthen, and implement these bedrock protections is vital to our nation, our children, and our environment.



EMPOWERING THE NETWORK

Over the next five years, River Network will increase the strength of our members and the power of our network by significantly expanding reach, leveraging voices from across our network, and increasing the network’s influence to create alignment and empower collective action on key issues. To achieve these goals, we will invest in current relationships, expand partnerships to reach common goals, and continue to support and train water champions.

CORE STRATEGIES

BUILD STRONG CHAMPIONS

River Network supports capacity across our network in four essential knowledge areas: (a) community watershed science, (b) policy and civic engagement, (c) equity, diversity, and inclusion in river conservation and water resource issues, and (d) organizational and coalition strength and impact. We deliver this work through mentoring, in-person trainings, webinars and self-paced distance learning, online discussions, our annual River Rally conference, and group facilitation/consultation.

OUTCOMES (YEAR 3-5)

Increase capacity of individuals we support across four essential knowledge areas (i.e. community watershed science; policy and civic engagement; equity, diversity, and inclusion; and organizational and coalition strength & impact).

STRENGTHEN OUR NETWORK

River Network strengthens bonds between groups and leaders, increases knowledge and skills needed to address key issues, creates alignment on shared value propositions and, when feasible, helps the network take collective action. We will provide virtual and in-person meetings, toolkits and other resources, and funding to support local projects.¹

OUTCOMES (YEAR 3-5)

Develop knowledge on the four key issues among groups and individuals supported through focused training services.

Increase the network’s ability to take action on the four key issues.

¹We anticipate that over the life of this strategic plan, we may identify additional issues that meet the criteria listed above and which emerge through our efforts to foster increased connectivity across our network.

GROW OUR NETWORK

River Network expands our network to include organizations, businesses, and individuals committed to healthy rivers and clean water. We will build and maintain a diverse membership that brings new voices and perspectives to the network. Restructuring our membership model, developing a map of organizations involved in river and watershed conservation and water advocacy, and cultivating new corporate and brand partnerships are primary ways we deliver this strategy.

OUTCOMES (YEAR 3-5)

Increase membership to 6,000, increase connection across the network, and at least double the number of individuals participating in network events and webinars.

Quadruple the number of corporate supporters for local projects and brand-sponsored local events organized by River Network, benefiting member groups.

LEVERAGE OUR VOICES

River Network amplifies stories of grit and promise from our network, increasing understanding of key issues and other topics, accelerating action on pressing policies. Effective and timely storytelling will attract attention to water issues and the intersection with equity, elevate their importance in our network, and increase support for solutions. River Network, through social media, earned media, our website, newsletters, and other publications, will help impactful stories from our network reach a wider audience.

OUTCOMES (YEAR 3-5)

Mobilize the network on key issues by publishing and promoting stories that inspire alignment and collective action on key issues.

Increase the number of network-member success stories published and promoted through River Network’s website, social media, and other media outlets; at least triple the reach of success stories, inspiring and furthering water protection and restoration across the U.S.





OUR COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

The final component of our strategic plan is our commitment to River Network's own organizational excellence. We are committed to developing a thriving organization that supports our mission and serves as a model for the river conservation and water community.

ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Thriving organizations distinguish themselves in many ways, including by their clarity of purpose, clear strategies for impact, effective board and staff leadership, financial transparency and stability, embrace of technology, and attention and commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. We commit to being a learning organization that continually evaluates the impacts of our work using robust and data-driven processes.

OUTCOMES (YEAR 3-5)

Double the size of our budget to \$5M and establish a six-month operating reserve.

Fill all board vacancies and achieve both greater diversity and financial support.

Cultivate a workplace environment that achieves high average tenure.

Create an internal data evaluation and learning team, and make programmatic improvements based on evaluation.

OUR TEAM, VALUES, AND INCLUSION

We are committed to having a highly effective and diverse team of board and staff. We will recruit and retain a strong and engaged board of directors to govern and lead our organization. River Network's Board of Directors will conduct annual self-assessments to evaluate their responsiveness to River Network's organizational needs, their effectiveness as a governing board, and the sustainability of both the board and the organization. We remain committed to retaining board members for three full terms when possible and appropriate.

River Network's staff must be top notch to achieve our core strategies. Our current employees bring a wealth of skills, perspective, and enthusiasm to their daily work, plus over 150 years of experience related to protecting our waters and supporting nonprofits. We are committed to recruiting and retaining staff members who are well-versed in the challenges facing rivers and waters. We will ensure River Network is a desirable place to work by nurturing our culture, remaining vigilant to our [core values](#), ensuring competitive salaries and benefits, and providing ongoing professional development opportunities. Over the next three to five years, we will recruit a more diverse workforce consistent with our dedication to [equity, diversity, and inclusion](#), to grow our staff and board, and improve staff stability by working to increase average tenure.

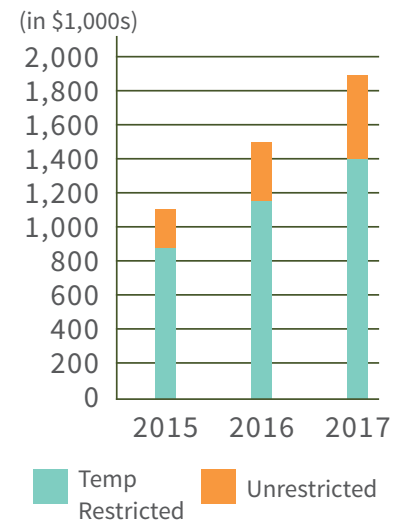


To move beyond crisis, we must create a new path of collaboration that prioritizes healthy rivers and ecological health as well as clean water for all people.

FINANCES

We will continue our revenue and net asset expansion initiated four years ago (see chart to the right) to the extent feasible and aim to double the size of our budget to \$5 million by 2022. We will also strive to build a six-month operating reserve and to grow our unrestricted assets. Greater financial solvency will allow River Network to become more sustainable over the long-term and grant us more flexibility to respond to emerging trends.

Historically, the biggest threat to River Network's core strategies and goals has been inconsistent funding. This has been particularly true when River Network depended substantially upon a few foundations for support. To mitigate this risk, this strategic plan creates greater clarity around our value proposition by advancing strategies that build on our organizational strengths and offers opportunities for greater impact through the power of the network. Our companion five-year fundraising plan emphasizes both expansion of all revenue types as well as further diversification of funding sources.



EVALUATING PROGRESS

Within the period of this strategic plan, we will expand our assessment processes and tools to better understand critical issues and trends affecting rivers and waters across the country, as well as which tools and engagement opportunities will address our community's primary needs. River Network is committed to continually evaluating progress, learning from our successes and mistakes, and making course corrections on a regular basis.

USE OF THIS PLAN

This plan provides a framework to guide the organization through the end of 2022. River Network has developed companion guidance to help operationalize this strategic plan. These include a three-year implementation plan (implementation plan for the final two years of this plan will be determined in 2020) and a five-year fundraising plan. These plans inform River Network's annual work plans and staff personal objectives, assuring efficiency, alignment, and accountability.



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