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From ‘Dead’ River to Living Treasure: ‘Sacred Water Shared Future’ Campaign Launches to Celebrate 100 Years of Mississippi River Restoration

May 19, 2026 | FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ST. PAUL, MN — A century ago, the Mississippi River through the Twin Cities was an ecological dead zone. In 1926, a water quality survey found only three living fish in the 42-mile stretch from Minneapolis to Red Wing, confirming that the river had become little more than an open sewer for a growing metropolis.

Today, the river is a thriving national park, a haven for wildlife, and a cherished recreational destination. To mark this miraculous turnaround, a coalition of local and national organizations has launched Sacred Water Shared Future, a year-long campaign throughout 2026 to celebrate 100 years of recovery and inspire the next century of stewardship.

“The story of the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities is one of the great environmental comebacks in American history,” said Casandra Champion, Metropolitan Council Principal Environmental Scientist and Project Manager for the campaign. “We went from a river that was dangerous to touch to one that sustains our economy, our spirits, and a vibrant ecosystem. Sacred Water Shared Future is about honoring that progress while facing the challenges of our time.”

Embracing Our Commitment to a Healthy River

The initiative’s name, Sacred Water Shared Future, was developed in partnership with local Indigenous artists and leaders. It honors the connection Indigenous peoples — particularly the Dakota and the Ojibwe — have held with the river (Wakpa Tanka or Misi-ziibi) for millennia, since long before industrialization degraded its waters, and the enduring relationship between the river and the people who depend on it now and into the future.

The campaign commemorates the 100th anniversary of the pivotal 1926 water quality study that exposed the river’s devastation and sparked a century of reform — from the construction of the region’s first wastewater treatment plant in 1938 to the creation of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency in 1967 and numerous other local, state and national policy efforts.

A Call to Action for the Community

Unlike traditional festivals hosted by a single entity, Sacred Water Shared Future is a community-wide platform designed to amplify the work of partners across the twin cities region. The campaign invites environmental groups, art collectives, schools, and neighborhood organizations to host their own events under the centennial banner.

“We are not just looking back; we are asking the community to define what the river means to them today,” said Chyann Mosey, Program Manager at Freshwater Society. “Whether it’s a cleanup, a paddling tour, an art installation, or a history lecture, we want everyone to see themselves as part of the river’s story.”

Residents and organizations are invited to:

- **Host an Event:** Organizations are encouraged to register river-focused activities on the official campaign calendar.
- **Share Your Story:** Contribute personal river stories to the MN StoryCollective to help shape future water policy.
- **Get Involved:** Attend an event or volunteer with partner organizations to remove invasive species or plant native habitats.

Looking to the Next 100 Years

While celebrating the return of fish and bald eagles, the campaign also highlights the work that remains. The river faces new threats from stormwater runoff and climate change.

“Restoration is not a finish line; it is an ongoing commitment,” said Kevin Reich, Executive Director of the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization. “This year is about building the resilience we need for the next 100 years, ensuring this water remains sacred and safe for future generations.”

A History of Pollution and a Legacy of Restoration

In the 1860s regional population began to grow in an ecologically unprecedented way. For thousands of years, people have lived near and depended on the Mississippi River. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, so many people came to live in the region that the accumulating human waste became a public health disaster. To protect the population from direct exposure to sewage, Minneapolis and Saint Paul built sewers to eliminate contact with raw waste. These first sewers discharged directly into the River and an annual spring flood carried much of the pollution downstream.



The growing region needed a reliable way to get goods into and out of the area. In 1917, Lock and Dam 1 was built to support commerce along the Mississippi River corridor. It held back the sewage as well as the water and prevented the waste from flowing away, creating unsightly floating mats of sewage and the constant stench of bubbling methane gas emitting from the rotting material.

In 1926, scientists conducted the first survey of the Mississippi River in the twin cities and found severe pollution and a decimated fishery, primarily caused by untreated human and industrial waste. In response, the Minneapolis–St Paul Sanitary District was created in 1933. In 1938 Metropolitan Water Recovery Facility, then known as Pig’s Eye Sewage Plant, began treating the waste before putting the clean water back into the river. Reports say that within four months of operation, the sewage mats disappeared from the River’s surface.

About the Campaign

Sacred Water Shared Future is led by a coalition of regional stewards, including the Capitol Region Watershed District, Freshwater Society, Metropolitan Council Environmental Services, Mississippi Park Connection, Mississippi Watershed Management Organization, the National Park Service, and the Mississippi River Network.

For more information, to register an event, or to view the calendar of 2026 activities, visit sacredwatersharedfuture.org.

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