



Chicago
Wilderness
Alliance

2025
Annual Report:
Collaboration
and Community



Our Resilient Community

The past year highlighted the strength and resilience of our Chicago Wilderness Alliance community, and our appreciation for you is limitless.

Throughout 2025, the Alliance community—you and our many partners in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin—met uncertainty with resolve and shared purpose, despite unprecedented disruptions at federal, state, and local levels that profoundly affected our work, colleagues, and missions.

Together, we responded not with hesitation, but with collaboration. We demonstrated that strong partnerships safeguard the most vulnerable ecosystems and the communities who depend on them.

Because of your leadership and tireless work, we celebrated the *Dr. George B. Rabb Force of Nature* awardees and *Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program* accredited sites, cooperated on the Climate for People and Nature process and Green Vision Initiatives, and shared expertise in person and online.

As we move into 2026, we are celebrating a remarkable milestone, our 30th anniversary and planning for our biennial Congress. This moment offers a meaningful opportunity to reflect on the progress we've made together, while looking ahead to the strategic opportunities before us. We know you share our excitement as we honor the successes of 2025 and look ahead to ways we are **Growing Forward Together!**

Elizabeth S. Kessler
Chair and Executive Director,
McHenry County Conservation District

Laura Reilly
Managing Director





2025 in numbers



6,785

PEOPLE
COLLABORATING

300+

ORGANIZATIONS
INVOLVED

590

JOBS POSTED

139

EVENTS SHARED

708

ONLINE LEARNERS

78

NATIVE-LED
CLIMATE SUMMIT
PARTICIPANTS

7,276^f **4,369^{ig}** **1,749ⁱⁿ**

SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS

The Alliance Green Vision:
To create and protect a vibrant,
accessible region
where people and nature thrive.

Celebration of Conservation

Every two years we honor the leading lights in our region. In October, our Celebration of Conservation at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum was a record-breaking commemoration of your accomplishments.

26 George B. Rabb Forces of Nature

Personifying the values of Brookfield Zoo's longtime director and conservation champion, this year's George B. Rabb Force of Nature awardees people, projects, and partnerships give us all hope.



2025 George B. Rabb Force of Nature Awardees

- BENJAMIN COX
- BROOK MCDONALD
- CLAUDIA GALENO-SANCHEZ
- EMY BRAWLEY
- GEORGE JOHNSON
- JAY YOUNG
- JOHN QUAIL
- JOSEPH SUCHECKI
- KEN KLINK
- LEE HANSEN
- LENORE BEYER
- LINDA MASTERS
- LIZA LEHRER
- MARK BOUMAN
- PATRICIA K. ARMSTRONG
- BE A TRAILBLAZER CAMPAIGN
- CHICAGO COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
- CITIZENS FOR CONSERVATION
- DEFUSING DISASTERS WORKING GROUP
- FRIENDS OF HACKMATACK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
- ILLINOIS RIVERWATCH
- MASTER PLAN FOR SALT CREEK AT FULLERSBURG
- POWDERHORN LAKE HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT
- REWILDING THE SOUTH BRANCH
- VOTE YES ON THE MCHENRY CO. CONSERVATION DISTRICT PROPOSAL COMMITTEE

**READ ABOUT OUR
2025 FORCE OF NATURE
AWARDEES**

5 Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program Sites Accredited

This initiative recognizes high-quality restoration work anywhere in the Chicago Wilderness Alliance region that exemplifies outstanding natural resource management.

At the Celebration of Conservation, our **Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program** (EERP) accredited five Platinum sites, the highest level possible and the most ever in this category.

- Blackwell and St. James Farm Forest Preserves, *Forest Preserve District of DuPage County*
- Busse Forest Nature Preserve, *Forest Preserves of Cook County*
- Grassy Lake Forest Preserve, *Lake County Forest Preserves*
- High Point Conservation Area, *McHenry County Conservation District*
- Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve, *Forest Preserve District of Will County*



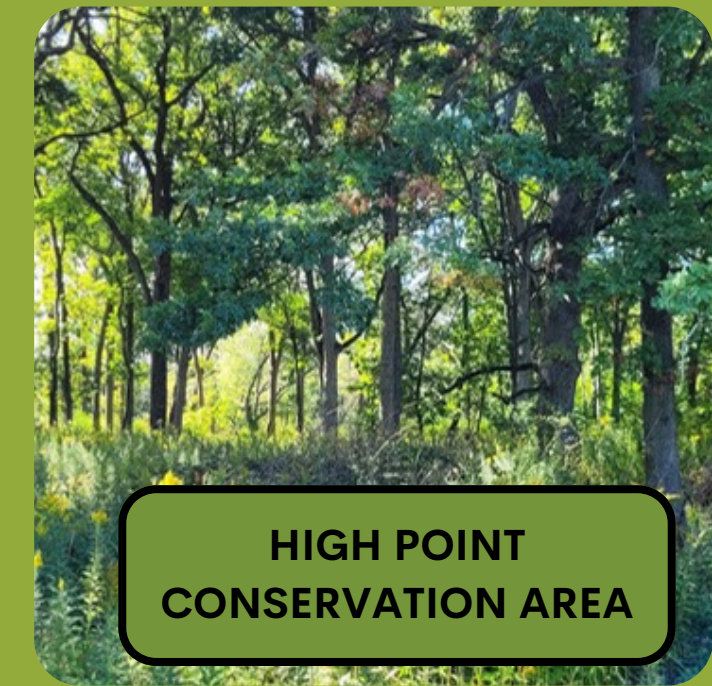
BLACKWELL AND ST. JAMES FARM FOREST PRESERVES



BUSSE FOREST NATURE PRESERVE



GRASSY LAKE FOREST PRESERVE



HIGH POINT CONSERVATION AREA



LOCKPORT PRAIRIE NATURE PRESERVE

LEARN ABOUT OUR 2025 EERP SITES

7 Green Vision Initiatives



During 2025, the network of [Green Vision Initiative \(GVI\) teams](#)—whose goals and activities are tracked on our data and mapping Hub platform—collectively:

- **Brought together** more than 200 conservation professionals at 80 meetings
- **Protected** 2,000 acres
- **Began revisions** to the Climate Action for People and Nature report
- **Supported** more than 10 unique pieces of legislation
- **Assisted with** two Native-led climate workshops and a Traditional Ecological Knowledge summit
- **Presented** at three conferences

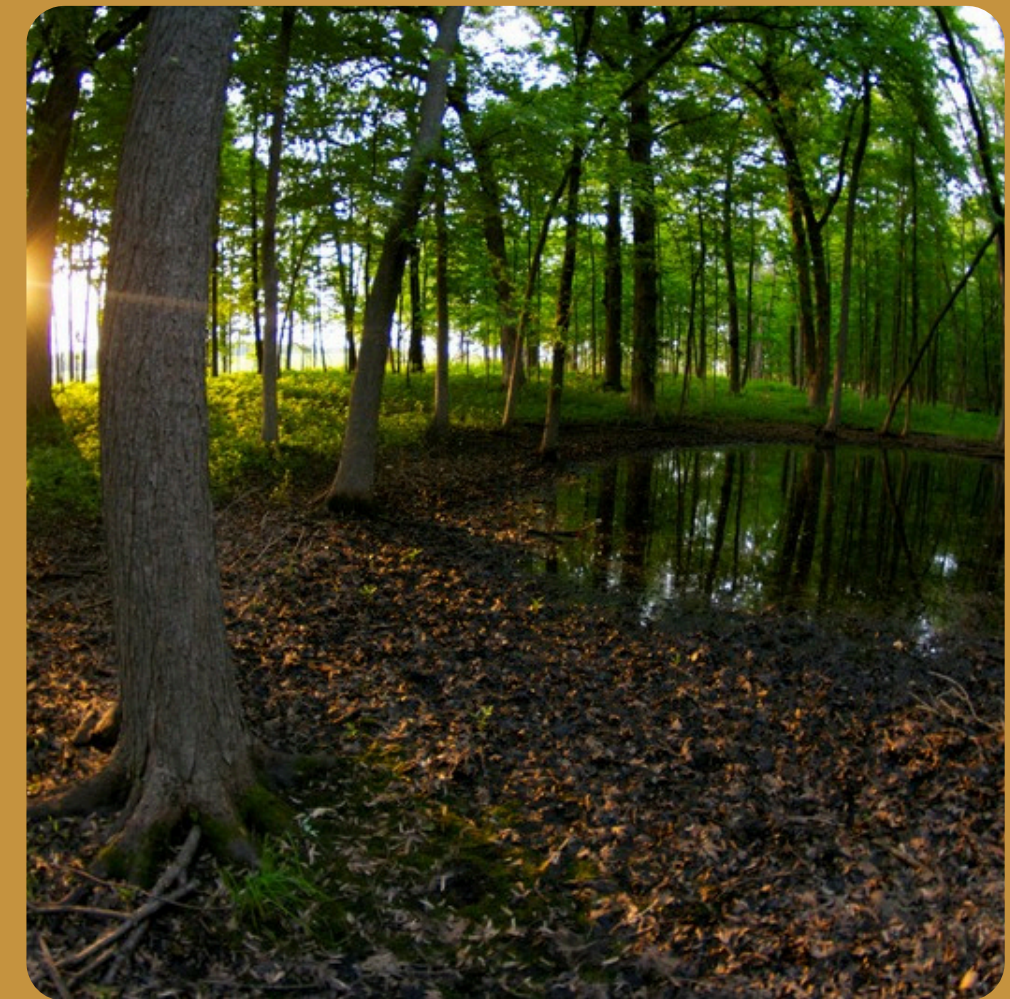
DISCOVER MORE OR PARTICIPATE ON A GVI TEAM

700+ People Learning Online

This year, more than 700 people across the region connected and continued learning with the Alliance, including multiple online sessions on working with Tribal communities and centering Traditional Ecological Knowledge in conservation work. Generous funding from the U.S. Forest Service and the Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources Urban and Community Forestry Program, which was eliminated in 2025, provided these experiences at no cost to our participants.

Partners also continued to use our [Café Webinar](#) series to share topics such as *Native Knowledge-Urban Landscapes*, *Rooted Knowledge-Urban Landscapes* and *Regional Agriculture: Looking Ahead and Acting Today*.

Most Cafés can be viewed for free anytime on the Alliance [YouTube channel](#).



100s of People Learning In Person

Alliance partners continue to ask for shared effort on **Traditional Ecological Knowledge**, both by lifting expertise from within these communities and widening the audience of learners.

With **Trickster Cultural Center**, the Alliance co-hosted a **Native-Led Climate Summit** in January and **Native Led Climate Workshop** in November, where people learned about climate issues impacting urban Indigenous communities and how to work collaboratively to mitigate and adapt to these changes.

We also began a new partnership with **Chicago's American Indian Center (AIC)**, and sponsored their **Rooted: Ancestral Knowledge and Ecological Futures** event in July. More than 100 people experienced this space to center knowledge systems that have too often been sidelined, especially by conservation decision-makers.

As a joint effort of the **Morton Arboretum**, **McHenry County Conservation District**, **Forest Preserve District of Lake County**, the Alliance continued to support access to **Prescribed Burn Training** for dozens of practitioners, bringing this vital management tool onto our region's landscapes.





1 Community-Led Plan: Climate Action for People and Nature



More than 45 people make up a co-design team that gathered over multiple sessions to create and revise our **Climate Action for People and Nature** project. A highlight came on November 5, 2025 (photo at left), when we came together at Chicago's famed Old Post Office to create Action Areas and Action Items.

The team is now in the final stages of defining ways specific target audiences—such as the Alliance, our partner organizations, municipalities and agencies, and the public—can move each Action Item forward.

People and entities impacted by climate change can see themselves in this plan and clearly understand their role in promoting nature-based solutions to combat and adapt to the threats of a changing climate.

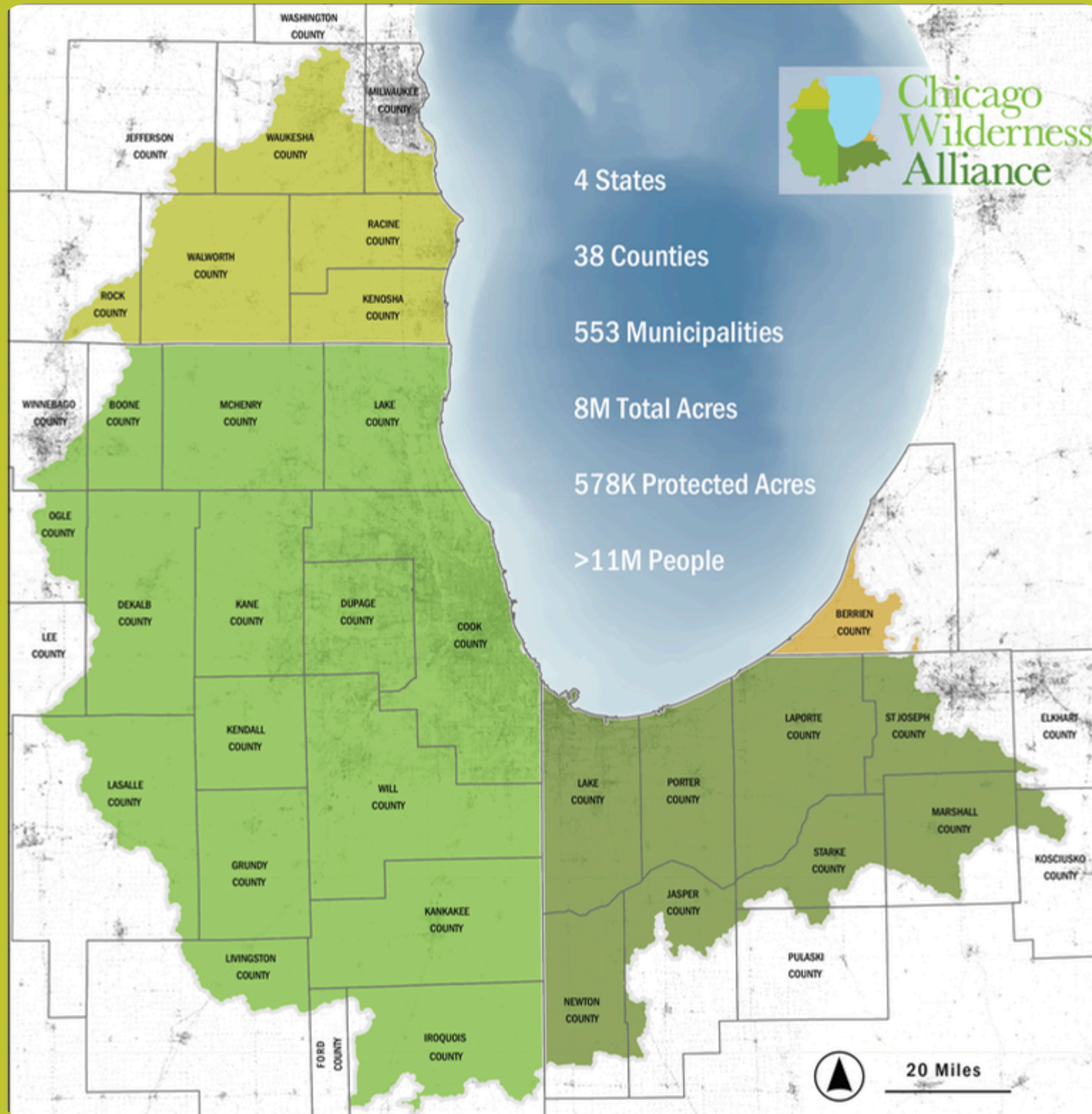
Too Many Collaborations to Count

Cooperative work benefits everyone, and 2025 was an exemplary year for Alliance collaborations large and small.

As a volunteer-led non-profit, we rely on staff, board, and other experts from within our 300+ partner organizations to give their time and expertise to our Steering Committee, Executive Council, Green Vision Initiative teams, and related projects. This allows the Alliance to lead on shared, regional conservation goals that benefit people and nature—and the missions of our partners.

In return, we support and amplify our partners' efforts and goals. This is especially true of initiatives that involve multiple organizations, such as the 2025 City Nature Challenge and Climate Action for People and Nature process.

We also raise the profile of partners' legislative Action Alerts, events, funding opportunities, and job postings by sharing them with a far wider, more diverse conservation-minded audience than most organizations could reach on their own.



[VIEW ACTION ALERTS](#)

[VIEW EVENTS AND FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES](#)

[VIEW JOB POSTINGS](#)

2025 Financial Report

Fiscal year ending December 31, 2025

REVENUE

Partnership Dues	\$134,100
Sponsorships and Donations	\$91,870
Grants	\$61,996
Program Fees	\$604
Royalties	\$0
Merchandise	\$235
Interest Revenue	\$9
TOTAL REVENUE	\$288,814

EXPENSES

General and Administrative	\$117,834
Programs and Activities	\$148,524
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$266,358

CHANGE IN NET ASSETS **\$22,455**

NET ASSETS AT BEGINNING OF YEAR **\$479,682**

TOTAL NET ASSETS, END OF YEAR **\$502,137**



The fiscal sponsor of the Chicago Wilderness Alliance is the Friends of the Forest Preserves, an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.



1 Shared Plan for the Future

As the Alliance community moves into our 30th year, we need all of you, and so many new partners, to commit to our shared conservation vision.

That's why in 2025 we brought in experts from **Global Conservation Solutions** to take us through an urgently needed strategic planning process.

Led by our Steering Committee, which comprises people from important ally organizations, the plan will guide our collaborative conservation initiatives, partnership priorities, and organizational structure for the next 5–10 years. We will launch the plan at Congress 2026 in November.

But the plan will only come to fruition if **YOU** continue to stay involved.

Thank you for being in collaboration and in community with the Alliance. Your partnership matters more than ever.

Thank you!
Your shared commitment
to conservation makes
our region more resilient.



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CWA c/o Friends of the Forest Preserves
PO Box 709,
Chicago IL 60690

(312) 356-0000

2025 Steering Committee

Chair: Elizabeth S. Kessler, McHenry County Conservation District

Vice-Chair: Victoria Wittig, PhD, Audubon Great Lakes

Treasurer: Emily Reusswig, Openlands

Secretary: Vincent J. Mosca, Hey and Associates

At-Large Members:

Isaiah Ballinger, Forest Preserves of Cook County

Leslie Dorworth, Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant

Laura Guderyahn, The Field Museum

Ted Haffner, Climate Change Consultant

Phil Nicodemus, Urban Rivers

Nathanael J. Pilla, Midwest Biological Survey, LLC

Maggie Soliz, Kane-DuPage Soil and Water Conservation District,
AIWSCD

Sergio Vargas, Illinois Environmental Council

Debra Walker Johnson, Forest Preserve Foundation

John Wasik, Lake County Forest Preserve District

Managing Director: Laura Reilly

[JOIN THE ALLIANCE](#)

[SUPPORT OUR WORK](#)

