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Mississippi River Cities and Towns Initiative (MRCTI) Annual Meeting in Bemidji, Minnesota

In the Face of Drought, Dozens of Mayors Convene at the Mississippi River Headwaters to Release Final Plastic Pollution Report and Forge Historic Partnerships with Indigenous Nations

Bemidji, Minnesota - Mayors from along the Mississippi River are gathering this week as part of the Mississippi River Cities & Towns Initiative ([MRCTI](#)) 12th Annual Meeting. The conference has brought together dozens of mayors from ten states as well as global stakeholders nationwide to release a critical report on the state of plastic pollution along the Mississippi River Corridor. This year's conference will be held at the headwaters of the Mississippi River in Bemidji, Minnesota, where the mighty Mississippi River begins.

Mayors are gathering with federal, local, and corporate leaders from around the world to increase infrastructure to reduce plastic pollution, solidify partnerships to equip Mississippi River cities with tools to best implement Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) resources, complete a historic agreement between the Indigenous nations of the headwaters region, and address the drought impacts currently gripping the corridor.

"This is a historic meeting for middle America for two critical reasons: one, we're releasing with United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and University of Georgia our final plastic pollution report for the whole river; and two, we're signing an historic new agreement with the three Indigenous nations of the headwaters region for a new level of engagement and partnership with those that have preserved our corridor for millennia," explained **Jim Strickland, Mayor of Memphis and MRCTI Co-Chair**.

Mayors, UNEP, and the University of Georgia released a plastic pollution report detailing the culmination of a citizen science report along the entire Mississippi River that provides an accurate detail of the plastic pollution intensity along the corridor and offers a brand audit to encourage plastic reduction commitments.

"The *brand audit* of our plastic pollution report can be especially valuable for us to know whose plastic waste is most prevalent in our corridor so we can partner with those producers to

* Jambeck, J. et al. (2020). The United States' Contribution of Plastic Waste to Land and Ocean. *Journal of Science Advances*, 6(44). DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.abd0288.

encourage and cooperatively assist in new plastic use reduction and recycling commitments. This report will also better empower our cities to apply for and implement IJA and IRA solid waste management and recycling grants,” asserted **Erick Simmons, Mayor of Greenville, Mississippi and MRCTI Co-Chair**.

“We are pleased to be partners on this important initiative with cities along the Mississippi River, just as countries worldwide are negotiating the first international, legally binding treaty on plastic pollution,” said **Rafael Peralta, UNEP Regional Director for North America**. “We need a full system transformation – backed by policy, transparency, and regulatory change – to eliminate plastic pollution; a system that builds new business models and market opportunities, creates jobs along the supply chain, and brings justice to vulnerable communities.”

“We are proud to be the science partner for the [Mississippi River Plastic Pollution Initiative](#) (MRPPI) to facilitate community-based data collection with Debris Tracker. There's power in the data all along the river now, for the mayors and community members to engage companies and industry, apply for grants, expand infrastructure, and more,” said **Professor Jenna Jambeck, PhD, New Materials Institute, University of Georgia**.

In tandem with the release of the report, mayors announced a new and innovative partnership to equip MRCTI cities with the tools and capacity to implement plastic circularity components such as broader recycling.

“This is a one-of-a-kind opportunity to create infrastructure that respects resource value, enhances communities through trust and transparency, and builds true wealth,” said **Mark Armen, Founder and CEO of Replenish**. “We are honored to partner with MRCTI to collect and market recyclable material that has historically ended up in the Mississippi River or a landfill. Together, we will restore our relationship with natural resources by transforming what has been seen as *trash* into an asset.”

More importantly, MRCTI mayors and the three Indigenous nations of the headwaters region created a more permanent and valuable place through which Indigenous nations and Mississippi River mayors can work together to ecologically improve the Mississippi River Corridor from Bemidji to the Gulf of Mexico. Indigenous nations represented in the new agreement are Red Lake Nation, White Earth Nation, and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

“Here at this meeting, we have achieved a beginning by entering a new and historic memorandum of common purpose. It lays the groundwork through which the Indigenous nations of the headwaters region and mayors along the corridor can work toward developing a way we can cooperate more consistently, eventually involving all the Indigenous nations of the Mississippi River,” said **Jorge Prince, Mayor of Bemidji, Minnesota and MRCTI Annual Meeting Host City**.

White Earth Band of Ojibwe supports the efforts of the Mississippi River Cities and Towns Initiatives. “We all have a responsibility to protect Mother Earth. The healthier our ecosystems

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are, the healthier our people and community are. We need to continue to take care of the Mississippi River because it produces food, medicines and our wild rice, shellfish, wildlife, natural resources depend on it. We also need to create awareness of the drought impacts along the river,” said **Secretary Michael LaRoque of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe**.

“Red Lake Nation is extremely proud to be a part of this memorandum of common purpose with MRCTI. We must be vigilant in protecting the Mississippi River and that includes monitoring the pipelines that cross our great river,” said **Hon. Darrell G. Seki, Chairman, Red Lake Nation**.

“We, the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, are committed to forging a stronger partnership with the Mississippi River Mayors. Through this historic agreement, we aim to preserve and restore the ecological balance of the Mississippi River Corridor, honoring the legacy of our ancestors and safeguarding this vital resource for future generations,” stated **Faron Jackson Sr., Leech Lake Tribal Chairman**.

Mayors also gathered to work directly with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on establishing a comprehensive drought policy for the nation.

“America’s most critical agricultural states are along the Mississippi River and we’re swiftly approaching ‘go-time’ for our export economy. Barge companies are announcing load restrictions, low water stages are being exceeded in multiple cities, and short-term relief is uncertain at this point. The 30-year drought of 2022 saw the lowest recorded levels of the Mississippi in the Memphis region. Over forty days of closures and restrictions on the river resulted in price convulsions throughout the supply chain. We’re hoping that scenario doesn’t play out this fall, but signs are pointing that way,” detailed **Mitch Reynolds, Mayor of La Crosse, Wisconsin and MRCTI Wisconsin State Chair**.

MRCTI proposed and worked with Congress to establish the nation’s first national drought council in 2013. The Drought Council has been led by NOAA and has made tremendous strides in developing the science and monitoring associated with drought, but we still lack national drought policy.

The mayors of MRCTI have strongly proposed consideration of these drought resilience policies:

1. Award federal disaster declarations to states for drought;
2. Allow cities to spend FEMA funds addressing drought impacts;
3. Make drought mitigation a spending priority for IIJA grants;
4. Develop national incentives for manufacturers to build out water recycling;
5. Allow for more adaptive multi-watershed management so river systems can be managed at basin scale to mitigate for climate impact;
6. Allow farmers and landowners to be compensated for voluntarily rotating acreage out of irrigation to alleviate drought;
7. Make agricultural credits for climate mitigation available under Title II, Subtitle C of the Inflation Reduction Act applicable to drought resilience activities.

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About the Mississippi Rivers Cities & Towns Initiative (MRCTI)

MRCTI is a coalition of 104 mayors from across the Mississippi River Basin, which spans nearly a third of the country. The Mississippi River provides drinking water to more than 20 million people and 50 cities. More than 60 billion gallons of fresh water is withdrawn from the river daily. The river's resources support 1.5 million jobs and create \$496.7 billion in annual revenue.

<https://www.mrcti.org/>

About the Red Lake Nation

The Red Lake Nation, with its unique lineage of Ojibwe people, protects, preserves, and maintains its status as an independent nation that is federally recognized as an Indian tribe, which possesses all the powers of a sovereign nation.

<https://www.redlakenation.org>

About the White Earth Nation

The White Earth Nation is a federally recognized Native American tribe located in northwestern Minnesota. The tribe's land base is the White Earth Indian Reservation. The White Earth Nation is the largest of the six component tribes of the federally recognized Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. It is also the largest band in the state of Minnesota.

<https://whiteearth.com/home>

About the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe

Leech Lake is a respected and progressive Indigenous nation with a tribal government that protects sovereignty, rights, and exercises authority. Leech Lake government and administrative services strive for their people to be educated, trained, respected, and capable leaders and proud Anishinabe.

<https://www.llojibwe.org/#>

About the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

UNEP is the leading environmental authority in the United Nations system. UNEP uses its expertise to strengthen environmental standards and practices while helping implement environmental obligations at the country, regional, and global levels. More information on the initiative can be found at www.unep.org/mississippi.

<https://www.unep.org/regions/north-america>

About University of Georgia's Debris Tracker

The Marine Debris Tracker is a free mobile app designed to help community members make a difference by contributing data on plastic pollution. Developed in 2010 in partnership with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and currently supported by Morgan Stanley, the Debris Tracker community is creating a bigger picture of marine debris and plastic pollution through collecting open data, generating scientific findings, informing policy, and inspiring upstream design. Over 7 million items have been logged to date.

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<https://debristracker.org/>

About Replenish

Replenish is the enterprise circularity platform. The first of its kind, Replenish's technology and network enable brands to recover and reuse their recyclable materials with full traceability, making it easy to act, accelerate engagement through trust, and achieve rapid impact. With over 66 million pounds of material processed to date, Replenish works directly with forward-thinking communities to collect materials and provide the tools and know-how to create an end-to-end material recovery system that delights residents and businesses alike. Visit replenish.com to find out more.