



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Great Lakes ReNEW named as semifinalist in inaugural National Science Foundation Innovation Engines competition

*Current, Chicago-based water innovation hub, coordinating effort that could lead to up to \$160 million over 10 years to help grow an inclusive Blue Economy in the Great Lakes*

June 14, 2023 - The National Science Foundation named the Current-led collaborative [Great Lakes ReNEW](#) as a semifinalist in a competitive process to receive up to \$160 million over ten years to create a Blue Economy innovation engine in the Great Lakes Region.

Great Lakes ReNEW was formed in response to a funding opportunity from the U.S. National Science Foundation's (NSF) [Regional Innovation Engines program](#), a competition to catalyze and foster inclusive innovation ecosystems across the country. The program offers the largest investments in NSF history and is expected to drive technology commercialization and accelerate industrial transformation across the country for decades to come. Thirty-four semifinalists were selected from 188 concept submissions.

Current and more than fifty partners spanning research institutions, industry, investors, and nonprofit organizations created Great Lakes ReNEW (ReNEW), a six-state, cross-sector collaborative focused on recovering energy, nutrients, and other critical materials from water and wastewater.

“Current was designed to be an innovation engine from the outset. Our mission is to boost water innovation and inclusive growth in the blue economy, and we have a track record of launching and leading the collaborations we need to succeed,” said Alaina Harkness, executive director of Current. “Great Lakes ReNEW would foster our region’s leadership in a critical segment of the climate solutions economy.”

ReNEW proposes an ambitious plan to use inclusive, streamlined innovation, workforce development, and stakeholder engagement to drive a decarbonized circular blue economy that would transform the Great Lakes region, with beneficial effects across the country.

“We have all the research and commercialization strengths here in the Great Lakes Region to become a water innovation superhighway,” said Junhong Chen, Crown Family Professor of Molecular Engineering at the University of Chicago’s Pritzker School of Molecular Engineering, and Lead Water Strategist for Argonne National Laboratory. “What we have been missing is the leadership to integrate and align these efforts to deliver greater economic impact and empower the industry of the future. Great Lakes ReNEW provides that leadership.”

Through the NSF program, up to five regional “engines” will be selected to build partnerships across industry, academia, government, nonprofits, and communities to drive inclusive growth through investment in research, development, and commercialization of advanced technologies that address national and societal challenges, while building workforce, entrepreneurship and engagement pathways that ensure benefits accrue to the people and places that need them most. NSF said that final awards are expected to be announced in the fall.

Workforce and entrepreneurship training is essential to support creation, implementation and management of new technologies and practices. ReNEW’s efforts will connect partners across workforce development systems, from community-based organizations to credentialing programs and community college systems to universities. The goal is a seamless pipeline of opportunities for individuals most affected by joblessness and systemic barriers to participation. Other approaches designed to advance the objectives of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility are incorporated into and advance the goals of every aspect of the plan.

The semifinalist designation comes just weeks after Current and partners released a strategic plan, [Upstream Illinois](#), the first in the nation to outline a roadmap to *inclusive* growth and innovation in the blue economy and build pathways to jobs and

entrepreneurship for currently underrepresented people and places. Upstream Illinois lays a foundation to capitalize on the region's significant water resources, labor force, and manufacturing and research strengths to prepare for a future of good jobs, innovation and leadership in water-related industries.

## About Current

Current is an independent nonprofit water innovation hub. Founded in Chicago in 2016, our mission is to grow an inclusive blue economy, accelerate innovation and solve pressing water challenges. We bring together corporations, advocates, researchers, and governments to develop water management policies and test new technologies – projects that would be too risky or even impossible without sustained collaboration. Current has helped attract more than \$20M in federal investments for water innovation to the region, launched the first real-time water quality monitoring tool for the Chicago River, and supported the commercialization of more than a dozen water startups. **Read more about Current:** <https://www.currentwater.org>

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