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Great Lakes ReNEW advances to finalist in inaugural National Science Foundation Innovation Engines competition

Current, the Chicago-based water innovation hub, is coordinating the effort which could yield up to \$160 million over 10 years to boost Great Lakes leadership on sustainable ecosystems

August 3, 2023 - [Great Lakes ReNEW](#) has been selected as [one of 16 finalists](#) across the country in a first-ever National Science Foundation competition for as much as \$160 million in funding over 10 years to create a Blue Economy innovation engine in the Great Lakes Region.

Great Lakes ReNEW, coordinated by Current and including more than 50 partners, was formed in response to a funding opportunity from the NSF's [Regional Innovation Engines program](#), a competition to catalyze and foster inclusive innovation ecosystems across the country. The new program offers the largest investments in NSF history and is expected to boost innovation capacity, create sustainable innovation ecosystems and drive inclusive economic growth for decades to come.

The finalists were chosen from 188 initial submissions, which was winnowed to 34 semifinalists in June. The ultimate winners will be named following site visits to each finalist location later this summer.

“ReNEW’s vision of the Great Lakes region as a powerful driver of global water innovation and inclusive economic opportunity is now one step closer to reality,” said

Alaina Harkness, executive director of Current, a water innovation nonprofit founded in Chicago in 2016 to solve crucial pressing water challenges.

To capitalize on an historic opportunity contained in the federal CHIPS act, Current and partners spanning research institutions, industry, investors and nonprofit organizations created Great Lakes ReNEW, a six-state, cross-sector collaboration focused on recovering energy, nutrients and other critical materials from water and wastewater. In addition to Illinois, the other Great Lakes states backing ReNEW are Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin.

ReNEW proposes an ambitious plan to use inclusive, streamlined innovation; workforce development; and stakeholder engagement to drive a decarbonized circular Blue Economy that would leverage the region's extraordinary water resources to transform the upper Midwest.

“Here in Illinois, we are proud to lead the clean energy revolution—fostering innovation and creating solutions for our world’s greatest challenges,” said Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker. “I couldn’t be prouder that Chicago’s Great Lakes ReNEW has been selected as a finalist for the National Science Foundation’s Innovation Engines competition. The freshwater resources of the Great Lakes are vital for the health, wealth and security of the entire nation, and the scientific, industrial and human resources we have right here in Illinois and across our region will help us win in the race for technologies to manage and protect our water assets.”

“Investing in water technology is an important way to drive innovation and research, support job creation and continue our state’s positive economic momentum while promoting and protecting our vital fresh water resources,” said Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers. “We are glad to support our university, industry and community partners as they lead the way with Great Lakes ReNEW, and my administration looks forward to continuing to work together to support sustainability in our region and bolster our economy.”

This is the final step in the process as NSF selects regional “engines” 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. The initiative will also build workforce, entrepreneurship and engagement pathways that ensure benefits accrue to the people and places that need them most.

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 finalist designation comes just months after Current and partners released a strategic plan, [Upstream Illinois](#), which is 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 strengths in manufacturing and research to prepare for a future of good jobs, innovation and leadership in water-related industries.

The partnering organizations that make up ReNEW to date include:

*AmFam Institute * AO Smith * Argonne National Laboratory * Black & Veatch * Burnt Island Ventures * CAEL * Cara Collective * Chicago State University * City Colleges of Chicago * Cleveland Water Alliance * Discovery Partners Institute * Dow * Entrepreneurs' Center * Evergreen Climate Innovations * Exelon * Freshwater Advisors * Fund for Our Economic Future * Great Lakes Water Authority * HIRE360 * Illinois Institute of Technology * Illinois Science & Technology Coalition * Illinois Ventures * Imagine H2O * Marquette University * Mazarine Ventures * Metropolitan Council * mHUB * New Water * Northwestern University * NSF I-Corps Hub Great Lakes Region * Ohio State University * Oldcastle * P33 * Purdue University * S2G Ventures * Sentry * State of Illinois * State of Ohio * State of Wisconsin * Steamville * TIES * True North Venture Partners * University of Chicago * University of Cincinnati * University of Illinois Chicago * University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign * University of Michigan * University of Minnesota * University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee * Wayne State University * World Business Chicago * WRTP Big Step*

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 \$20 million in federal investments for water innovation in 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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