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Upstream Illinois-a blueprint to boost water innovation and inclusive growth in the Great Lakes Region-is ready for implementation

Current, Chicago-based water innovation hub, leads coalition to invest in and capitalize on critical sector by 2030.

May 2, 2023 (Chicago) After intensive analysis supported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Current, a Chicago-based water innovation hub, has today released a detailed blueprint to drive economic growth and innovation in the vital but often overlooked blue economy.

The strategic plan, [Upstream Illinois](#), is the first in the nation to outline the roadmap to *inclusive* growth and innovation in the blue economy and build pathways to jobs and entrepreneurship for currently underrepresented people and places. It 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.

The Upstream Illinois strategy identifies key industry trends and capitalizes on a moment in time when the impacts of climate change and water scarcity are sharpening focus on the economic and political value of water. When its strategies are enacted by 2030, Illinois will be positioned as a global leader in developing and exporting solutions to water challenges, and attracting and elevating the stewardship practices of the water-intensive industries headquartered in Illinois-manufacturers, food and beverage producers, agriculture, and more.

“Upstream Illinois is our state’s first strategy to attract and build innovative companies, grow jobs and investment, and train the future water workforce. This blueprint shows where Illinois needs to invest to ensure that our future economy is a clean economy, with innovations in both water and energy resources at the center, and an inclusive economy, creating jobs and wealth for the people and neighborhoods who need them most,” said **Alaina Harkness, the Executive Director of Current.**

“Products and services that clean, treat, and move water play an important role in Illinois’ economy and are fundamental to the health and well-being of our region’s residents and environment,” said **Kristin A. Richards, Director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO).** “We look forward to working with our region’s industry, research, innovation and entrepreneurship communities to leverage the economic potential of the blue economy.”

Upstream Illinois responds to the reality that water risks are growing globally, with economic consequences for Illinois and the broader Great Lakes region. Climate change and water scarcity across the nation and globe are likely to result in a population influx in areas with abundant water access, and the industries that rely on and work with water and related technologies have significant future growth potential.

“Chicago and Illinois have a unique chance to unlock the full potential of our water resources as a driving force for economic growth,” said **Michael Fassnacht, President & CEO of World Business Chicago, Chief Marketing Officer of the City of Chicago, and board member of Current.** “Our region boasts a remarkable network of businesses, academic and research institutions, top-notch infrastructure, a diverse and talented workforce, and abundant water resources. With these assets, we can establish ourselves as a global leader in innovative strategies that create new opportunities for businesses and workers in this promising new field.”

“As a global supplier spanning multiple water-intensive sectors, including food, beverage, brewing, paper and corrugating, **Ingredion** is an excellent example of how Illinois’ leadership to minimize water risk can have global impact. Access to a pipeline of innovative water technology here in our Illinois headquarters is an advantage, and we look forward to working with our peers in the industry to continue to raise the visibility of water leadership across our supply chain” said **Catherine Zimmerman, Vice President of Operations Sustainability for Ingredion Incorporated.**

The Upstream Illinois strategic vision explicitly promotes practices and policies that will increase access to employment, ownership, and wealth for women, BIPOC, and other communities that are underrepresented in the water sector and disproportionately burdened by water challenges.

Upstream Illinois gives city, state, and federal leaders the tools needed to align around and invest in the blue economy, and prioritize water security within existing efforts to combat climate change. The drivers are clear. Leaders in water-intensive industries (including food and beverage, agriculture, and manufacturing) are recognizing the need to mitigate water risk in their operations and supply chains and minimize environmental impact. This will generate demand from research institutions, investors, and entrepreneurs to speed invention, commercialization, and adoption of new water technologies.

The Upstream Illinois plan includes **inclusive growth strategies** in five distinct areas, to be achieved by the end of the decade:

- **Industry-led collaboratives**: Convening and connecting leaders in the blue economy, enabling continuous innovation and partnership building to elevate corporate water stewardship and tackle cross-sector challenges.
- **Employer-led workforce development**: Reforming labor market systems with employers at the table, to better prepare workers for entry level through executive-level jobs in the blue economy. Key job pathways include: lead service line replacement, green infrastructure maintenance, wastewater based epidemiology, water and wastewater operations, and manufacturing.
- **Testing, Certification & Demonstration Centers**: Developing opportunities for innovative water companies to test and validate their products with end users in many sectors, accelerating their path to commercialization.
- **Business Growth Services Programs**: Building programs to support entrepreneurs and innovators in taking their ideas from the lab to the market, helping them scale up into established companies that solve local and global challenges.
- **Manufacturing Initiatives**: Connecting the assets of existing hubs for manufacturers capable of producing water technologies to strengthen regional supply chains and match manufacturers with water technology innovators.

The blueprint was developed with partners, beginning in 2021. An Inclusive Blue Economy Advisory Group supported the research and strategy development, with

cross-sector leadership including members from Ingredion, ADM, Greeley and Hansen, Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, Evergreen Climate Innovations, and others.

See the full report: <https://www.currentwater.org/grow-an-inclusive-blue-economy>

The Blue Economy

The Upstream Illinois blueprint defines the blue economy as the collection of companies that develop and provide technologies, products and services that manage the movement, quality, and use of water - in addition to the inputs to make these products, supporting industries, and the customers that demand these products. Blue economy assets include, for example: researchers developing novel materials and sensors at the region's universities and national labs; the manufacturers of pumps, pipes, and microfiltration devices; the engineers at food production plants sourcing and employing water efficiency products; utility workforces that clean and treat our drinking water and wastewater.

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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