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CONTACT:
Jara Kern, 847-323-6796
jara@mharris.com

Great Lakes Water Innovation Engine is awarded up to \$160 million U.S. National Science Foundation grant

Current, the Chicago-based water innovation hub, is leading Great Lakes ReNEW, the multistate partnership to boost Great Lakes leadership on resource recovery and the circular economy

January 29, 2024 – [Current](#), the Chicago-based water innovation hub, has been awarded up to \$160 million over 10 years from the U.S. National Science Foundation to develop and grow a water-focused innovation engine in the Great Lakes region, the NSF announced today. Current is one of the 10 inaugural NSF Regional Innovation Engines (NSF Engines).

With a potential NSF investment of nearly \$1.6 billion over the next decade, the NSF Engines represent one of the single largest investments in place-based research and economic development in the nation's history—uniquely placing science and technology leadership as the central driver for regional economic competitiveness and job creation.

The funding will enable [Great Lakes ReNEW](#), a six-state collaboration coordinated by Current in partnership with Argonne National Laboratory and the University of Chicago, to fulfill the NSF's mission of spurring economic growth in regions that have not fully participated in the technology boom of the past few decades.

“Waste has no place in this world of increasing water and resource scarcity,” said Alaina Harkness, executive director of Current and principal investigator for Great

Lakes ReNEW. “Our engine will find new ways to recover and reuse water, energy, nutrients, and critical materials from our water. These innovations will create economic opportunities for residents of our region; help strengthen our domestic supply chain for clean energy technologies; and address water quality and security issues around the world.”

In its winning proposal, ReNEW sets out to turn waste into wealth by figuring out how to remove dangerous forever chemicals, such as PFAS, and valuable minerals, such as lithium, from our wastewater.

The vision is that American manufacturers would then reuse some of these extracted valuable minerals, enabling domestic production of batteries and fertilizers, almost all of which are currently imported.

ReNEW was one of 10 groups from across the United States to be chosen as an NSF Engine. It was selected from 16 finalists, 188 invited proposals, and more than 700 initial submissions.

“We have all the research and commercialization strengths here in the Great Lakes region to become a water innovation superhighway,” said Junhong Chen, co-principal investigator of Great Lakes ReNEW, Professor at The Pritzker School of Molecular Engineering at the University of Chicago and Lead Water Strategist at Argonne National Laboratory. “Now we can start building it.”

ReNEW is backed by six Great Lakes states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Illinois’ support includes \$2 million in state funding for the innovation engine.

“The inaugural NSF Engines awards demonstrate our enduring commitment to create opportunity everywhere and enable innovation anywhere,” said NSF Director Sethuraman Panchanathan. “Through these NSF Engines, NSF aims to expand the frontiers of technology and innovation and spur economic growth across the nation through unprecedented investments in people and partnerships. NSF Engines hold significant promise to elevate and transform entire geographic regions into world-leading hubs of innovation.”

“This is truly a moonshot moment for the Great Lakes and Midwest climate leadership,” Harkness said. “A bipartisan coalition of three governors and

organizations from six states aligned to bring Great Lakes ReNEW to life. We were ambitious; we were inclusive; and we were organized during the proposal effort. That will be our recipe for successful implementation."

"The Great Lakes are a vital natural resource for the health, wealth, and security of our entire nation," said Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker. "That's why I'm thrilled that Current was selected to receive this federal award that will help transform our Great Lakes region. Thanks to investments like these, our top-tier workforce, and our industrial resources, we're leading the clean water and energy revolution."

"Protecting our Great Lakes and freshwater resources is an essential part of maintaining our economic momentum while supporting good-paying jobs and building the sustainable future we want for our kids," said Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers. "Great Lakes ReNEW will help us connect the dots between industries, sectors, and states to promote research and innovation, bolster our workforce to meet 21st-century needs, and transform our economies for future generations."

"By working together, we can ensure that we have both clean drinking water and innovative wastewater infrastructure to protect public health, provide for a high quality of life and enable economic and employment vitality," said Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine.

"I'm so proud of the region for this win," said Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. "This is a win not just for clean water and climate globally, but also a win for regional cooperation locally."

"This engine will be anchored in Chicago, which is becoming a national epicenter for clean water innovation," said Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson. "I want to congratulate Current, the University of Chicago, and Argonne National Laboratory for their ambition and ingenuity, which is going to create an untold number of jobs right here throughout the lifecycle of this grant."

Great Lakes ReNEW is made up of more than 50 partners that span research institutions, industry, investors, government and nonprofit organizations with a shared goal of developing and commercializing better "selective separation" technologies.

ReNEW's efforts won't be confined to research labs. The organization also will connect partners across workforce development systems, from community-based

organizations to credentialing programs, community colleges and universities to provide training and careers for individuals most affected by joblessness and systemic barriers to participation.

The NSF Regional Innovation Engine award builds on [Upstream Illinois](#), a strategic plan developed with support from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration and released by Current and its partners in 2023, which is the nation's first roadmap to inclusive growth and innovation in the Blue Economy.

The grant award number is 2315268. 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 * HIRE360 * Illinois Institute of Technology * Illinois Science & Technology Coalition * Illinois Ventures * Imagine H2O * Marquette University * Mazarine Ventures * Metropolitan Council * Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago * mHUB * National Fund for Workforce Solutions * 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 * 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 * Whirlpool * 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 \$35 million in federal investments for water innovation in the region, launched the first real-time water quality monitoring tool for Chicago waterways, drafted a blueprint to build a thriving Blue Economy in Illinois and supported the commercialization of more than a dozen water startups. [Learn more about Current.](#)

About the NSF Engines

Launched by the NSF Directorate for Technology, Innovation and Partnerships in May 2022, the NSF Engines program uniquely harnesses the nation's science and technology research, development enterprise and regional-level resources. For more information, visit the [NSF Engines program website](#).

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