



IMPACT REPORT 2025

Current

Current is an independent nonprofit water innovation hub with a mission to grow a circular blue economy, accelerate water innovation, and solve pressing water challenges.

We collaborate with industry, innovators, communities, nonprofits and governments to advance innovative water technologies and policies that boost our economy while protecting our water resources.

To date, Current has helped raise over **\$76.4M** for regional water innovation and economic development, supported **19 R&D projects**, **15 pilots**, and **110+ startups**, and engaged more than **55,000** people through events and convenings.

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FROM OUR CEO

Dear Friend,

As we reflect on 2025, I am proud of the momentum Current has built, and energized by what lies ahead. This year marked a pivotal chapter in our evolution from a regional water innovation hub into a nationally recognized engine for economic growth and environmental resilience—driven by the collective ingenuity of a powerful network of more than 75 partners.

This growth is not for growth's sake; it is demand-driven. Water innovation is both an environmental and economic imperative. As water risk rises regionally and globally, the health and prosperity of our communities depend on solutions that fundamentally transform how we use, protect, and recover value from water.

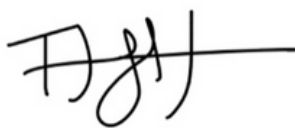
With the continued expansion of Great Lakes RENEW—our big bet supported by a catalytic investment from the National Science Foundation—we **demonstrated what is possible when research, industry, and communities align around shared goals.** Together, we advanced breakthrough technologies to recover critical resources and eliminate toxic contaminants, accelerated commercialization pathways, and trained the workforce needed to support a circular blue economy.

In 2025 alone, we backed a dozen transformational research projects, supported dozens of technology pilots, engaged thousands of people through events and convenings, and helped prepare hundreds of workers and students for water-focused careers.

Our work increasingly reflects the realities shaping the next decade: rising industrial water demand, emerging contaminants, stressed infrastructure, and the growing interdependence of water, energy, and national competitiveness. **Current's role as an ecosystem builder—connecting discovery to application, innovation to deployment, and talent to opportunity—has never been more essential.**

As we approach our 10th anniversary in 2026, we are entering a defining window. Grounded in nearly a decade of partnership-building, Current is ready to lead—accelerating impact where it matters most. **Thank you for being part of this journey and for your continued support.**

In partnership,



Alaina J. Harkness
Chief Executive Officer, *Current*
CEO & Principal Investigator, *Great Lakes RENEW*

HIGHLIGHTS

GREAT LAKES RENEW: THE FIRST 2 YEARS

Our National Science Foundation-supported Great Lakes RENEW Engine is catalyzing our region's circular blue economy, bolstering domestic supply chains, and protecting vital freshwater resources.

Since its official launch in early 2024, RENEW has fully achieved its Phase I goals:

- Deploying funding to 12 cutting-edge R&D projects
- Launching 3 new entrepreneurship programs supporting 22 technologies
- Training over 450 workers for careers in the blue economy
- Engaging 1,400+ youth in STEM pathways tied to water innovation

THE NSF'S
INITIAL \$14.7M
HAS LEVERAGED
AN ADDITIONAL

\$20M+

TO IMPLEMENT
RENEW'S
WASTE TO
WEALTH VISION

\$76.4M

Raised for regional
water innovation and
economic development

9 YEARS OF WATER INNOVATION

As Current approaches its 10-year anniversary in 2026, we're reflecting on almost a decade of driving water innovation forward. From advancing breakthrough technologies to supporting early-stage innovators and building partnerships across the region, our impact is measurable and growing. Here's a snapshot of the progress we've made so far:

1,800+

K–12 students engaged
in water-focused STEM
learning activities

550

Workers trained for jobs
in the blue economy

15

Water technology pilots
conducted

110+

Startups engaged or
receiving tailored
commercialization support

19

R&D projects supported

55,000+

People engaged and
inspired through
events

YEAR IN IMPACT

January

NEW PARTNERS JOIN CRC

Marquette University, University of Minnesota, and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee joined the Current Research Consortium (CRC), which provides strategic, use-inspired guidance that shapes Current's programs.



FUNDING TO ADVANCE INNOVATIVE WATER TECHNOLOGIES

Published the **Great Lakes RENEW Use-Inspired R&D and Translation Grant Program** RFP in order to provide competitive funding to advance water research and technology.



CHICAGO WATER WEEK

Hosted Chicago Water Week with 36 events led by 50+ partners, reaching 5,000+ participants; launched the inaugural **Freshwater Forum** convening 250 attendees.

MINING WATER TECH PILOT PATHWAYS PROGRAM

Launched a new pilot pathways program with **Nomadic Venture Partners**, supported by **EDA** funding, to connect innovators and mining leaders and speed water technology deployment.



February

BLUE ECONOMY ECOSPHERE KICKS OFF



The Blue Economy Ecosphere (BEE) is a specialized collaborative network focused on advancing water-related education and workforce development across the Great Lakes region. Coordinated by **TIES**, this network directly supports RENEW's work, and kicked off with founding STEM Ecosystem members from Cleveland, Chicago, and Milwaukee.

March

April



H2NOW SEASON FIVE + VIRRIDY PILOT

H2NOW Chicago, our real-time water quality monitoring program for the Chicago and Calumet rivers—supported by the **Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago**—returned for its fifth season. We also partnered with **Virridy** to pilot their Lume sensor in our H2NOW open-water testbed.

May

June

GREAT LAKES RENEW I-CORPS WATER INNOVATION PROGRAM

Partnered with the **NSF I-Corps Hub: Great Lakes Region** to launch a water-focused I-Corps **JUMPSTART** cohort, supporting research teams to advance water technologies from lab to market.

July

ASPEN CLIMATE IDEAS: CHICAGO

At Aspen Ideas Climate in Chicago, Current highlighted water by hosting, speaking, and connecting with innovators, advocates, and leaders shaping the future of water, climate, and the Great Lakes.

August



ACS: CIRCULAR WATER SYMPOSIUM

During the American Chemical Society (ACS) Fall 2025 Meeting, Great Lakes RENEW and partners hosted the Circular Water Economy Symposium to spotlight how water connects industries and fuels U.S. innovation, competitiveness, and security.

September

CHICAGO RIVER SWIM RETURNS



For the first time in nearly a century, an open-water swim took place on the Chicago River. H2NOW Chicago contributed real-time water quality data leading up to the event.

CURRENT ANNOUNCES RELOCATION

October



WEFTEC IN CHICAGO

Team Current attended a variety of WEFTEC sessions, met with RENEW partners on the exhibit floor, and engaged in numerous events throughout the week.

November

SUSTAINABLE WATER TECH ACCELERATOR COHORT ANNOUNCED

Seven startups were selected for our Sustainable Water Tech Accelerator in partnership with mHUB. Backed by Great Lakes RENEW, this program helps hardtech innovators bring breakthrough water solutions to market with funding, mentorship, and pilot opportunities.



WATER & ENVIRONMENTAL TECHNICIAN TRAINING COHORT GRADUATES

Our first cohort completed the six-week training program, developed with OAI, preparing adults for careers in water and environmental technology.

December

Developing Water Solutions With Cutting-Edge Research

Photo courtesy of Northwestern University

Current enhances and connects research capabilities across institutions in the Great Lakes region, creating a globally significant hub for water technology research.

Through Great Lakes RENEW, Current delivers more than just **research funding**, we deliver hands-on support for **cross-institutional research collaboration**, facilitate **knowledge exchange** and **thought leadership**, and align researchers with the needs of end-users to create clearer commercialization pathways.

Research breakthroughs

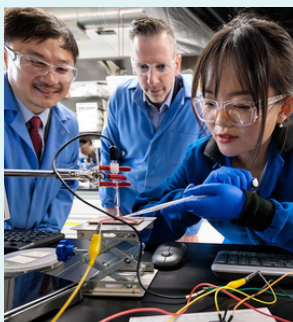
Specialist Sponge Captures Valuable Minerals From Polluted Storm Water



A new sponge-like material from Dr. Vinayak Dravid and his team at Northwestern University can absorb and release stormwater pollutants, including phosphate, copper, and zinc, enabling future reuse.

[Read about it in Forbes.](#)

Researchers Develop New and Highly Sensitive test for PFAS, or “forever chemicals”



Dr. Junhong Chen (University of Chicago PME) and Dr. Seth Darling (Argonne National Lab) have developed a portable device that detects trace synthetic compounds in water, including PFAS.

[Read about it on CBS News.](#)

Selecting and supporting the next generation of R&D leadership

Earlier this year, we published a call for proposals for our inaugural **Great Lakes RENEW Use-Inspired R&D and Translation Grant Program**.

This competitive funding opportunity supports cutting-edge research in wastewater treatment, water reuse, and resource recovery, and expands RENEW’s portfolio of technologies that recover valuable materials, remove contaminants, enable water reuse, and advance testbed development.

- **Concept Papers Submitted:** 120 from 41 institutions
- **Cross-Institution Collaboration:** 93% of submissions had leads from different institutions
- **Industry/Utility Partnerships:** 36% of teams included industry or utility co-leads
- **Focus Areas:** PFAS, Critical Minerals, Nutrients, Testbeds, and Water Reuse

Pending funding, we expect to announce the projects selected in early 2026.

R&D Progress to Date

- 12 R&D Projects Deployed
- 9 Peer-Reviewed Journal Publications
- 5 Patents (including provisional filings)
- 12 Current Research Consortium Partners

Community Supported:

48 Researchers 26 Jobs Created

Translating Innovation Into Economic Impact

Grounded by the needs of end users in industry, utilities, and communities, RENEW's commercialization strategy advances water and resource recovery technologies shaped by those who will deploy, fund, or benefit from them. We support entrepreneurs and innovators on their journey from lab to market by filling critical commercialization gaps, including testbeds, accelerators, and investors.

Our 2025 Translation Programs

Great Lakes RENEW I-Corps Water Innovation Program

- For academic researchers ready to translate water-related discoveries into marketable solutions.
- 32 applications, 2 cohorts, 13 teams selected

Sustainable Water Technology Accelerator with mHUB

- For early-stage, pre-Series A startups refining their technologies and scaling their businesses.
- 300+ applications, 7 teams selected

Mining Water Technology Pilot Pathways Program with Nomadic Venture Partners

- For advanced startups pursuing pilot projects in the mining sector.
- 40+ applications, 2 teams selected

In partnership with **mHUB**, Current selected seven startups for the inaugural **Sustainable Water Tech Accelerator**, advancing solutions in resource recovery, contamination removal, and water and energy efficiency. The cohort receives investment, pilot support, and other benefits through Great Lakes RENEW.



The RENEW Connected Testbed Network



Current staff doing maintenance at one of four H2NOW water quality testing sites.

RENEW's Connected Testbed Network reached new milestones this year, piloting technologies at sites across our region and showcasing the power of collaboration.

So far, our coalition has tracked **400+ technologies** and facilitated **40+ pilots** to trial emerging water technologies under real-world conditions and speed their path to market.

At our **H2NOW Chicago testbed** in the Chicago and Calumet Rivers, multiple pilots are underway to test new water quality monitoring technologies—including one with **Virridy**, whose Lume sensor measures microbial contamination in water.

Building the Water Workforce for a Circular Blue Economy

**America's Next Water Crisis?
A Lack of Experienced Workers.**
— Bloomberg, 2024

The blue economy faces **critical workforce challenges**: an aging workforce, skill shortages, limited career awareness, and rapidly evolving technology needs.

Great Lakes RENEW addresses these challenges with a comprehensive workforce development and STEM strategy. With a suite of programs across our region, we are creating seamless pathways into quality water careers for people of all ages and backgrounds.

RENEW also expands and upskills the water workforce needed to modernize infrastructure, treat contaminants, monitor systems, and recover valuable resources from water.

550+

workers trained for the blue economy



1,400+

K-12 students engaged in water-focused STEM learning activities



Building a Blue Jobs Workforce



“Taking the water class was a life-changing experience for me. I gained knowledge, confidence, and real hands-on skills that opened the door to employment. The program not only gave me the tools I needed but also the belief in myself that I could build a solid future in this field.”

— Jakori Jones, ELCS Sewer & Water Training Graduate, 2025

WRTP | BIG STEP's Entry-Level Construction Skills pre-apprenticeship in Milwaukee, WI provides credentials and training to prepare participants for water and sewer trade apprenticeships and careers in the water sector. Coursework includes OSHA certification, principles of water resources, and applied projects, supported by strong contractor engagement and job placement services.

Workforce & K-12 STEM Programs

In 2025, RENEW launched programs to grow a skilled water workforce:

Water & Sewer Construction Certified Pre-Apprenticeship Program

Partner: WRTP | BIG STEP

Construction Trades Training Program

Partner: HIRE360

Blue Economy Ecosphere

Partner: TIES (Teaching Institute for Excellence in STEM)

Environment & Water Careers Program

Partner: OAI

River Lab Workshops

Partner: Project SYNCERE

Building a Water Innovation Ecosystem in the Great Lakes

Current builds a **collaborative cross-sector network** in the Great Lakes Region by connecting partners, developing field-building thought leadership, and aligning regional players around shared visions. Across events, strategic communications, policy engagement and economic research, we turn what would otherwise be a loose collection of organizations and ideas into a powerful engine, growing the Great Lakes blue economy.

Market Making

The value of water is often hidden in plain sight. Water is connected to nearly every industry—but realizing its full potential requires an active market maker. Great Lakes RENEW advances a market-making mission: driving markets and systems that value water and wasted materials, and creating economic opportunity for people and communities.

Thought Leadership

By pairing strategic content with coordinated media engagement, we're ensuring water challenges, emerging opportunities, and breakthrough solutions are visible to key audiences and markets.

GLOBAL
MINING
REVIEW

**Mine smarter,
waste less**

[Read it here.](#)

circle of blue

**Water Determines
Great Lakes Region's
Economic Future**

[Read it here.](#)

Chicago Tribune

**The once-polluted
Chicago River now
hosts open-water swims**

[Read it here.](#)

CRAIN'S
CHICAGO BUSINESS

**The next industrial
transformation is here.
Are the Great Lakes
resource-ready?**

[Read it here.](#)

75+

Great Lakes
RENEW partners

6

States collaborating
to build a circular
blue economy

\$974B

GDP supported by the
blue economy in the
Great Lakes Region

8.5M

People employed in
the Great Lakes
blue economy



Events & Convenings

2025 marked our most active year of events yet. Current and our partners represented RENEW at local, national, and international convenings—**speaking, presenting, or exhibiting at 50+ events and participating in more than 100 overall**—to strengthen partnerships, elevate thought leadership, and broaden our impact across the water innovation ecosystem.

Charting the Next Decade of Water Innovation

Today's most urgent water challenges—including global scarcity, water stress from AI and advanced computing, and growing public health pressures—underscore water's immense value. They also highlight a well of untapped opportunities to transform waste into wealth, driving economic growth, environmental resilience, and national security.

Nearly a decade of planning and coalition-building has positioned Current and our Great Lakes RENEW engine to lead this transformation. Since releasing *Upstream Illinois in 2023*, we've catalyzed and amplified aligned regional efforts—from policy agendas to new investment theses and economic development strategies—all pointing toward a circular, innovation-driven water future for the Great Lakes.

The decade ahead is our window to scale a circular water economy, anchored in the Great Lakes, powered by breakthrough technologies, and built to strengthen our economies, environments, and communities.

Help us rise to meet this moment. We appreciate your support.

Ways to Get Involved



Host an event for or sponsor **Chicago Water Week**, a weeklong celebration that highlights the region's water leadership through dozens of events organized by Current and more than 50 partner organizations.

[Learn More](#)


H2NOW Chicago returns in Spring 2026 for its sixth season, made possible by the incredible support of our partners and advisors. Have a water technology you're looking to pilot, or interested in partnering with us to amplify real-time water quality insights in your community? Reach out today!

[Get Involved](#)


2026 marks **Current's 10-year anniversary**. A decade of driving water innovation and building partnerships calls for celebration, and we want you to be part of it! Connect with us to see how you can get involved in our events and initiatives next year.

[Contact Us](#)

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Water Innovation is Powered by Partnerships

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University of Illinois System

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Sentry Equipment Inc.
UL Research Institutes

Government Partners

U.S. National Science Foundation

**U.S. Department of Commerce
Economic Development
Administration**

U.S. Department of Labor

**Illinois Department of Commerce &
Economic Opportunity**

**City of Chicago Department of
Water Management**

**Metropolitan Water Reclamation
District of Greater Chicago**

Current Research Consortium

Argonne National Laboratory
Illinois Institute of Technology
Marquette University
Northwestern University
Ohio State University
Purdue University
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

Foundations

Chicago Community Trust
JPMorgan Chase Foundation
McDougal Family Foundation
Once Upon a Time Foundation
Origami Works Foundation
Pritzker Traubert Foundation

Individual Gifts \$500+

John DeBlasio
Phyllis Hollander
Nicole Horvath
Paul & Lynn Kearns
Jim & Kitty Mann
Dylan Yurgionas

We are deeply grateful to our partners, collaborators, supporters, and advisors for their invaluable contributions to Great Lakes RENEW.

TEAM *Current*

