



GREAT LAKES RENEW



STRATEGIC PLAN

For Advancing a Circular Blue
Economy in the Great Lakes
Region and Beyond

Current

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Great Lakes RENEW is an NSF Regional Innovation Engine led by Current. RENEW is a six-state coalition of **75+ partners** who are advancing innovative research, technology, programs, and policies that drive the Great Lakes Region's circular blue economy.

Current is an independent 501(c)3 nonprofit and the anchor organization leading Great Lakes RENEW. Founded in Chicago in 2016, Current is a hub for water innovation with a mission to solve pressing water challenges by accelerating innovation and growing a circular blue economy. Current collaborates with a broad ecosystem to advance water solutions, strategies, and policies that boost our economy while protecting our water resources.

NSF Regional Innovation Engines: An initiative created to generate economic growth, fund critical technologies, and build local innovation hubs in regions historically overlooked by tech booms. In 2024, Great Lakes RENEW was designated one of ten inaugural NSF Engines. This designation allowed us to formally launch RENEW as a region-wide effort and receive up to \$160M in funding from NSF over 10 years.



Foreword

ADVANCING A CIRCULAR WATER ECONOMY: A CALL TO ACTION FOR THE GREAT LAKES

Growing water risk, critical mineral shortages, the rise of artificial intelligence and advanced computing, and public health threats are converging to create a once-in-a-generation inflection point. But in that convergence lies an extraordinary opportunity: to transform the waste in our water systems into wealth as a driver of economic growth, environmental resilience, and national security.

This is the heart of our **NSF Great Lakes RENEW Engine**, a 10-year innovation catapult launched in 2024 to reimagine how the U.S. captures, cleans, and recovers valuable minerals and removes harmful contaminants from water.

Together, our coalition of 75+ partners is advancing the research, commercializing the technologies, training the talent, and scaling the ecosystem we need to meet this critical moment.

This work builds on nearly a decade of leadership by Current and our partners to demonstrate that water is not only an environmental priority, but an economic one.

Since publishing Illinois' first blue economy strategy in 2023 and securing up to \$160M over 10 years to launch and grow Great Lakes RENEW, we've aligned regional strategies, attracted new investments, built a powerful coalition, and established the Great Lakes as a national leader in water innovation.

At the time of publishing this strategic plan, our track record includes:



19

R&D projects supported to advance critical water research



110+

Startups engaged to accelerate innovative water technology solutions



560+

People trained for water jobs and 1,650+ youth engaged in water STEM programs



\$123.2M

Funds raised, leveraged, and invested across our ecosystem

Foreword



The Great Lakes Region is home to 84 percent of North America's surface freshwater, a world-class manufacturing base, leading research institutions, and \$1 trillion in economic activity. We have the assets, expertise, and water needed to develop and deploy solutions that can strengthen both water security and economic prosperity for generations to come.

The stakes have never been higher, but Great Lakes RENEW is the innovation engine built to meet this moment.

This strategic plan provides a three-year roadmap for turning our vision into action: advancing water solutions, strengthening regional competitiveness, creating high-quality jobs, and positioning the Great Lakes as a global leader for developing and deploying the water technologies our future depends on.

We invite you to join us in transforming waste into wealth and building a more resilient water future for the Great Lakes and beyond.



Foreword



JOIN GREAT LAKES RENEW

RENEW partners are advancing solutions across sectors. Partner with Great Lakes RENEW to:



Researchers: Advance breakthrough water technologies and move promising solutions out of the lab and into the market.



Entrepreneurs: Access resources, funding, customers, and commercialization expertise to advance and scale water technologies.



Industry: Inform our coalition's research, technology, and workforce priorities; pilot and adopt new water technologies; and invest in commercialization and training programs.



Utilities: Participate in research, partner on training programs, and host testbeds to validate technologies that improve water systems, quality, and resource recovery.



Investors: Invest in the technologies and companies that are solving water challenges and addressing market gaps.



Policymakers: Collaborate to build policies, incentives, and public investments that enable water innovation and economic growth.



Employers & Educators: Build a water workforce talent pipeline by connecting people to education, training, and career opportunities in the blue economy.



Communities: Provide local insights and priorities to shape solutions that deliver meaningful environmental, economic, and public health benefits.

Together, we can build a thriving blue economy across the Great Lakes region and beyond. [Contact us to explore how you can get involved!](#)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Great Lakes RENEW (Recovery of Energy, Nutrients, critical Elements, and Water) advances solutions to today's most pressing water challenges, creating new technologies, family-supporting jobs, and wealth-building opportunities for our region.

The Problem: Conventional water and wastewater treatment flushes valuable resources down the drain and leaves harmful contaminants behind, putting our environment at risk while leaving viable economic opportunity on the table. At the same time, growing industrial demand and increasing global water stress threaten our ability to support a growing and changing economy.

Our Solution: Grow a **circular blue economy** in our region that turns water challenges into economic opportunity. Economic growth and environmental sustainability are often viewed as adversarial goals, but a circular blue economy finds opportunity at the intersection of water challenges and untapped economic potential in our region. Great Lakes RENEW advances a shared vision where water and the valuable resources it contains are put to their most productive use, strengthening the health of our environment, people, and economy.

How We'll Get There: By 2029, we will leverage funding from the NSF and drive investment to the Great Lakes Region to:

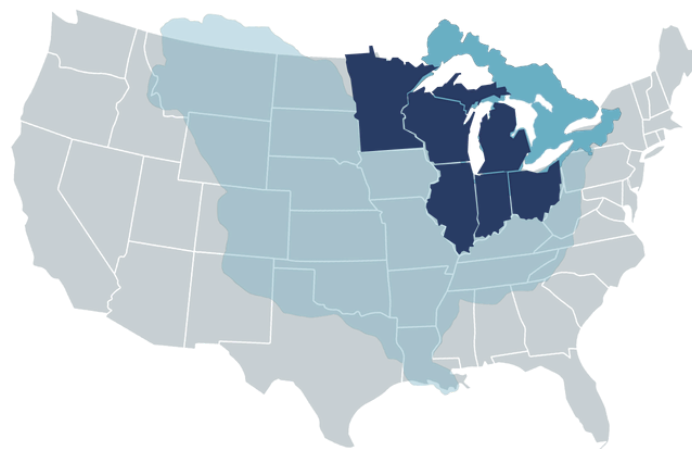
- Enable groundbreaking research by supporting over 40 research and development projects advancing selective separation and resource recovery technologies
- Commercialize water technology by supporting over 400 startups and building the nation's first connected testbed network to host over 300 technology pilots
- Build the water workforce by training 3,000 adults for jobs in water and reaching 5,000 kids through STEM education programs
- Develop an ecosystem that influences policies, systems and markets to enable a transition to a circular blue economy.

NSF has made a significant federal investment in this strategy. **Now, our job is to build on that down payment to establish the foundation, sustain the momentum, and fully achieve our vision of a circular blue economy for the Great Lakes Region and beyond.**

OUR STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Our Mission: Catalyze the circular blue economy in the Great Lakes Region by recovering valuable resources and eliminating harmful contaminants from water — securing domestic supply chains, sustaining water-intensive industry, and safeguarding our nation's most vital natural resource: our freshwater.

Our Strategy: Unite a cross-sector coalition of partners across the Great Lakes to collectively transition the region to a circular blue economy. Together, we advance the development and commercialization of water technologies, prepare the water workforce, and influence policies, systems, and markets to enable this transition.



Although our work and partnerships span all across the globe, the RENEW coalition is concentrated across six Great Lakes states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

Our Theory of Change

By discovering, developing, and deploying innovative, economically viable technologies, RENEW is: (1) meeting the demands of growing water-intensive industry; (2) recovering valuable resources such as critical minerals and materials from wastewater and transforms them into economic and national security assets; (3) eliminating harmful contaminants such as PFAS from water; and (4) generating jobs, ownership opportunities, and long-term wealth opportunities for people in the Great Lakes region. **Our strategy is convergent, collaborative, and cross-cutting**— designed so that our actions advance multiple goals simultaneously.

Great Lakes RENEW's long-term ambitions are aimed at market building, policy, and systems change. We will create long-term impact by leveraging the collective power of the region to speed the uptake and adoption of new technologies and create economic and environmental prosperity. To achieve our mission, we:

- **PLAN:** Assess the current landscape of systems and programs and identify gaps and align key partners around strategies and tactical projects.
- **DO:** Design and launch programs and projects, often in partnership with others.
- **ACTIVATE:** Build and connect a water innovation ecosystem that moves our mission forward, aligning systems across the region to enable faster commercialization, collaboration, and a greater scale of impact.

This strategic plan is a living blueprint for Current and the RENEW coalition.

Our vision is ambitious, and realizing its full impact will take a decade or more. But the path forward is clear, and the next steps are achievable. **Read on to explore the work ahead and how we plan to turn our vision into action.**



GOALS & ACTIONS

Research & Development | Commercialization
Workforce Development | Ecosystem Building | Engine Building

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

Driving Cutting-Edge Research Discoveries

To address our most pressing water challenges, we must invest in the research and development that can lead to new and better ways of managing, treating, and recovering water. The breakthroughs we develop today can help create safer, more resilient water systems and make better use of the valuable resources found in water and wastewater.

Great Lakes RENEW brings together researchers, industry, utilities, and communities to discover, develop, and deploy innovative materials, technologies, and processes that remove harmful contaminants and recover valuable resources from water and wastewater—including critical minerals, nutrients, energy, and water itself.

We have identified three research focus areas where advances in science and technology can help address real-world needs:



Material Platforms: Developing new materials, such as membranes and sorbents, that can remove contaminants and recover valuable resources from water and waste streams.



Emerging Process Technologies: Exploring new approaches, including biotechnology, to more efficiently and selectively recover valuable resources.



Real-Time Sensors & Sensor Networks: Developing sensors and connected monitoring systems that provide real-time information about water quality and detect specific contaminants and other substances.

Our goal isn't just to fund cutting-edge water technology research – but to bring together a consortium of researchers, align their work with the needs of industry, utilities, and communities, and facilitate the knowledge and resource sharing that will move the field further with greater speed.

This **use-inspired** approach bridges fundamental science with practical application, ensuring that these breakthroughs are developed with their end-users in mind.



RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

Driving Cutting-Edge Research Discoveries



GOALS & ACTIONS FOR ADVANCING SCIENTIFIC SOLUTIONS TO WATER CHALLENGES



GOAL: Inform use-inspired research with real market needs. Equip researchers to shape work around validated market needs and end-user identified technology gaps to create stronger pathways to adoption and impact.



ACTION → Identify, validate, and deepen our understanding of market needs. Establish direct channels for end-user insights, uncovering and validating critical pain points, priority use cases, and adoption barriers.



ACTION → Inform researchers about the technical market landscape before developing research ideas. Deliver market insights to researchers to help them prioritize research with user-identified commercial applications.



ACTION → Inform regional stakeholders about the state of resource recovery and circular water economy technologies. Orient the ecosystem around shared challenges and opportunities for focused research efforts.



GOAL: Increase the amount of use-inspired water technology research happening in the Great Lakes region. Grow the Great Lakes as a regional hub for use-inspired research solutions for the blue economy.



ACTION → Continuously align RENEW's technical priorities with end-user needs by soliciting end-user input.



ACTION → Fund, launch, and run use-inspired R&D projects that align with RENEW's technical priorities through competitive RFPs.

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

Driving Cutting-Edge Research Discoveries

GOALS & ACTIONS FOR ADVANCING SCIENTIFIC SOLUTIONS TO WATER CHALLENGES



GOAL: Build, connect, and support a community of researchers focused on RENEW's technical priorities. Facilitate connections and strengthen research collaborations across regions, institutions, disciplines and sectors to break down silos between fields and support deeper knowledge exchange.



ACTION → Organize structured peer cohorts to support researchers from idea to execution. Increase collaboration, idea sharing, feedback and peer-supported problem solving on research roadblocks. Provide educational resources about regulatory considerations, data security, Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs), and other topics.



ACTION → Facilitate shared resources across the community including: datasets, water samples, talent, facilities, and more.



RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

Driving Cutting-Edge Research Discoveries

RENEW IN ACTION: PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Use-Inspired R&D and Commercialization Grant Program

In 2025, RENEW launched a competitive funding opportunity to advance innovative research in wastewater treatment, water reuse, and resource recovery. We received over 120 concept papers from teams of researchers, startups, utilities, and industries. Following evaluation and peer review, 12 projects were selected for funding, expanding the R&D portfolio to 24 active projects. Focus areas include critical mineral recovery, contaminant removal, water reuse solutions, and testbed development. Projects are eligible for up to \$500,000 and are scheduled to launch in 2026.

The RENEW Research Technical Roadmap

RENEW will release a publication highlighting key technological advancements and milestones for the future of resource recovery from water and wastewater. This is a strategic document that provides a vision for the future of innovations, outlines opportunities, challenges, gaps, and suggests steps to advance the sector. Opportunities identified in the roadmap can guide researchers on their future research directions, corporations on their future business development, investors and federal agencies such as **NSF** and **DOE** on their future investments, and universities/nonprofits on workforce development needs. Serving as a blueprint for innovation, the roadmap extends RENEW's impact far beyond our own funded projects.



COMMERCIALIZATION

Moving Water Technology from Lab to Market

Commercialization is the process of moving research and technologies out of the lab and into the market. RENEW helps accelerate this journey by providing water innovators with the support, connections, and resources they need to advance from discovery to deployment.

Water technologies face a particularly challenging path to commercialization. Innovators often encounter gaps in funding, talent, mentorship, piloting opportunities, customer connections, and validation. And because water innovation spans everything from advanced materials and hardware to digital tools and biological and process technologies, there is no one-size-fits-all path to market.

RENEW is building a deeper, more specialized support ecosystem designed to meet innovators where they are and help them navigate the unique challenges of bringing water technologies to market. This includes connecting innovators with the resources, expertise, pilot opportunities, industry partners, and end users they need to test, validate, refine, and scale their solutions.

What is a Testbed? A testbed is a controlled environment to trial and validate technology. The environments can vary in scale and function. Testbeds can include labs, utilities, industrial facilities, natural environments, or purpose-built facilities.



COMMERCIALIZATION

Moving Water Technology from Lab to Market



GOALS & ACTIONS TO ACCELERATE WATER TECHNOLOGY COMMERCIALIZATION



GOAL: Advance early-stage R&D breakthroughs towards market readiness.



ACTION → Provide researchers with critical business expertise, market insights, and commercial roadmaps, bridging the gap between lab breakthroughs and viable products.



GOAL: Diversify capital sources for water technologies, and bridge critical gaps between public and private sector investment.



ACTION → Increase early-stage, pre-venture support for water technologies through philanthropic and impact investor connections, business development grants, and research funding.



ACTION → Grow venture capital investments in water technologies by creating a dedicated seed or venture fund, connecting vetted entrepreneurs with angel and venture investors, and building a network of investors interested in water market opportunities.

COMMERCIALIZATION

Moving Water Technology from Lab to Market



GOALS & ACTIONS TO ACCELERATE WATER TECHNOLOGY COMMERCIALIZATION



GOAL: Strengthen the water sector's entrepreneurial talent pipeline.



ACTION → Equip new entrepreneurs with essential skills and mentorship through specialized coaching programs and connect them to startups needing talent.



GOAL: Provide comprehensive, wraparound support for water technology innovators to reduce technical and market risks, overcome key commercialization barriers, and accelerate the deployment of innovative water solutions.



ACTION → Support early-stage startups with accelerators and commercialization support programs tailored specifically for water innovators.



ACTION → Expand commercial market opportunities for startups by leveraging industry partnerships to accelerate licensing, joint ventures, pilot deployments, and acquisitions.



ACTION → Build collaborative relationships with regulatory bodies and stakeholders to support the evaluation, validation, and adoption of emerging water technologies.

COMMERCIALIZATION

Moving Water Technology from Lab to Market

GOALS & ACTIONS TO ACCELERATE WATER TECHNOLOGY COMMERCIALIZATION



GOAL: De-risk water technologies by enabling real-world validation and building confidence among investors, regulators, and end users.



ACTION → Develop a regional network of connected testbeds to pilot, validate and certify technologies of all scales and readiness levels. Include standardized intake, data tracking and sharing protocols to ensure efficient pilots.



COMMERCIALIZATION

Moving Water Technology from Lab to Market



RENEW IN ACTION: PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Connected Testbed Network

Great Lakes RENEW is creating the first connected testbed network in the U.S. to test and validate innovative water technologies in real-world conditions. The network will provide diverse piloting environments, a centralized hub in Chicago, and integrated workforce and STEM training opportunities. Through technology scouting and a robust matchmaking process, researchers, startups, and companies can quickly find the right testbed for their solutions. By accelerating testing and fostering collaboration among universities, industry, and utilities, the network helps move new water technologies closer to market readiness.

Entrepreneurial Support Programs

Our commercialization programs are designed to help water technologies advance toward market adoption. Support ranges from personalized mentorship to cohort-based programming, ensuring tailored guidance for technologies at every stage of development. Programs include water-specific **I-Corps** cohorts, accelerators, training to pursue non-dilutive funding like **SBIR/STTR grants**, prototyping support for products, and pilot preparation.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Building the Next-Generation Water Workforce

A strong water workforce is essential to keeping our communities healthy, our water systems running, and our economy moving. Yet the sector faces growing workforce challenges, from an aging workforce and limited awareness of water careers to rapidly evolving technologies that require new skills.

At the same time, water jobs are good jobs. Wages in the water cluster — which includes organizations that develop and provide technologies, products, and services to manage the movement, quality, and use of water — are 37% higher than state averages. As the circular blue economy grows, so does the opportunity to build rewarding careers across water utilities, technology, manufacturing, research, and other industries.

RENEW is bringing together partners across the Great Lakes to expand access to these opportunities, strengthen education and training, and equip workers with the skills needed for the future of water. Our Workforce Development strategy builds career pathways from K-to-Gray, helping people discover water careers, gain the skills and experience to enter the field, and continue growing throughout their careers.

What is K-to-Gray? K-to-Gray is a comprehensive workforce approach spanning all stages of education and career. It integrates early STEM learning, pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships in the trades, entrepreneurship, and advanced university degrees to support the entire lifecycle of a blue economy career.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Building the Next-Generation Water Workforce



GOALS & ACTIONS TO EXPAND THE CIRCULAR BLUE ECONOMY WORKFORCE



GOAL: Increase awareness of and access to blue economy jobs and training through coordinated outreach, partnerships, and resource development that connect regional talent to stable, family-supporting careers.



ACTION → Analyze water workforce supply and demand to identify gaps and emerging skill needs. Assess priority areas to guide targeted awareness efforts and technical training.



ACTION → Develop a centralized digital hub for training, education, and career resources. Create an accessible platform that aggregates programs, pathways, and industry information for students, workers, and employers.



GOAL: Increase the size and skill of the water workforce to meet the evolving demands of a circular blue economy, building a pipeline that supports immediate job placement and long-term career pathways.



ACTION → Support, develop, and deploy water workforce training programs that address critical skill gaps.



ACTION → Increase youth interest in water sustainability, management, and resource recovery through K-12 STEM programming and curricula, hands-on learning activities, and career exposure across the region.



ACTION → Integrate water and resource recovery content into higher education through interdisciplinary, industry-informed curricula that prepare students for research, innovation, and non-academic blue economy careers.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Building the Next-Generation Water Workforce

GOALS & ACTIONS TO EXPAND THE CIRCULAR BLUE ECONOMY WORKFORCE



GOAL: Build a bigger, broader talent pool to meet growing demand in water careers.



ACTION → Reach more people through wide recruitment, launch on-ramps into the sector through pre-apprenticeships and other program models, lower the hurdles that keep people out, and map out clear pathways for advancement.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Building the Next-Generation Water Workforce

RENEW IN ACTION: PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Blue Jobs Training Programs

RENEW's workforce development strategy builds on the infrastructure, expertise, and proven programs that already exist in each of our communities, rather than starting from scratch. We partner with trusted local organizations in major metropolitan areas across our region of service to expand, adapt, or create clear pathways to quality water careers. In Milwaukee, we partnered with **WRTP** to develop and run a certified pre-apprenticeship program preparing trainees for skilled trades jobs in water and sewer infrastructure, including plumbers, pipefitters, steamfitters, operating engineers, laborers, and electricians.

In Chicago, **HIRE360** recruits and trains candidates for these trades, and supports trainees moving from pre-apprenticeships into union apprenticeships building and maintaining critical water infrastructure. These programs sit alongside pilot initiatives such as a water and wastewater technician training program and wastewater epidemiology pilot that prepares workers for emerging roles in water quality and public health.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Building the Next-Generation Water Workforce



RENEW IN ACTION: PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

K-12 Water STEM Programs

RENEW's K-12 strategy is built on partnerships with established STEM education organizations that engage youth across the region. We work with these partners to embed content on water quality monitoring, resource recovery, stormwater management, and other principles into existing programs. We work with TIES, a national nonprofit that designs STEM learning ecosystems and develops in-school and out-of-school curricula and activities.

In Chicago, we collaborate with **Project SYNCERE**, a community-based organization that introduces students to engineering and STEM careers, to bring water-focused learning into their existing programming. These partnerships are complemented by RENEW-developed, hands-on experiences designed to be implemented all across our region. Together, these efforts have already reached hundreds of youth in communities and classrooms.



ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

Connecting, Orienting, & Activating an Ecosystem

RENEW brings together organizations across industry, research, government, utilities, economic development, workforce, and communities around a shared vision for a circular blue economy. **Our role is to build the connective tissue that turns a broad coalition into a coordinated, high-functioning innovation engine** — connecting ideas to resources, research to real-world needs, and partners to opportunities to collaborate.

By strengthening relationships, aligning priorities, and creating pathways for meaningful collaboration, RENEW can help the region move faster, reduce silos, and turn what would otherwise be a loose, decentralized group of organizations into a coordinated, high-functioning innovation engine. A strong ecosystem is essential to moving water solutions from the lab to the market and ensuring they deliver benefits across the region.

Over the next three years, we will expand RENEW's geographic and sectoral reach, deepen engagement among existing partners, and bring new organizations and stakeholders into the coalition.

We will create more opportunities for partners to connect, share knowledge and resources, identify shared challenges, and collaborate on projects that advance our vision.



ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

Connecting, Orienting, & Activating an Ecosystem

GOALS & ACTIONS TO CONVENE A WATER INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM



GOAL: Reform, enhance, and influence the policies, systems, and markets to support the transition to a circular blue economy, including regulatory, economic development, workforce, and education systems and more.



ACTION → Orient the ecosystem around a shared vision and work with partners to define shared strategies, outcomes, and roles that guide collective action.



ACTION → Lead policy research and engagement to inform and influence systems supportive of a circular blue economy.



GOAL: Develop market pull for a secure, competitive, productive, and circular blue economy by building awareness and demand across key industry, government, regulatory, and community actors, speeding the uptake of circular water technology and practices.



ACTION → Convene and connect the ecosystem to increase productive collaboration to break down silos and spark productive collaboration.



ACTION → Tell the story of RENEW and the circular blue economy to drive engagement and action at regional, national, and global levels.

ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

Connecting, Orienting, & Activating an Ecosystem

GOALS & ACTIONS TO CONVENE A WATER INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM



GOAL: Build the field for a circular blue economy and innovation ecosystem by building awareness and capacity for the field to learn quicker, use and improve best practices, and implement strategy with fewer barriers, increasing productive collaboration and communication.



ACTION → Activate local leadership to steward RENEW strategies within their communities and connect them to regional and national resources to scale their impact.



ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

Program Highlights

GREAT LAKES RENEW IN ACTION

Blue Economy Research Agenda

RENEW will deliver important market insights that define and size the blue economy and its growth over time, while analyzing key technology markets. Our research will continue to put previously undefined markets on radar for governments, investors, industry, and other important audiences. [Read our State of the Blue Economy report \(2026\).](#)

Convening & Communicating

RENEW will bring people together through events, media engagement, and multimedia storytelling to showcase our work, partners, and the broader water innovation ecosystem. These efforts will strengthen partnerships, highlight RENEW's thought leadership, and foster learning and collaboration across sectors and regions. Chicago Water Week, our largest annual convening, will serve as a flagship platform to connect researchers, entrepreneurs, industry leaders, investors, policymakers, and community partners while elevating the Great Lakes region as a global hub for water innovation.



ENGINE BUILDING

Building a High-Capacity Organization and Coalition

Great Lakes RENEW is an innovation engine – a coalition defined by formal partnerships with a vision to transform waste into wealth and transition the Great Lakes Region to a competitive, productive, and circular blue economy.

Engine Building encompasses the work of RENEW to build, resource, and sustain an agile, effective organization that aligns our coalition around a shared vision and empowers partners to execute our strategic plan.

GOALS & ACTIONS TO BUILD AN INNOVATION ENGINE



GOAL: Build and nurture a collaborative, multi-state coalition that serves our ecosystem and region of service. Enable the systems, processes, facilities, and structures our coalition needs to succeed.



ACTION → Strengthen Current as the organization anchoring RENEW by developing a strong, cross-disciplinary team, upgrading our facilities, and improving operational, systems, and data management strategies.



ACTION → Establish and implement clear partnership pathways for all RENEW partners, allowing them to better collaborate across regions, sectors, and backgrounds. Leverage internal communications to support cross-coalition alignment.



ACTION → Convene end-users to continuously guide and refine use-inspired research & development, commercialization, and workforce priorities.



ACTION → Establish and implement a learning agenda that informs strategy. Conduct an annual evaluation and social network analysis to inform and refine priorities over time.

ENGINE BUILDING

Building a High-Capacity Organization and Coalition

GOALS & ACTIONS TO BUILD AN INNOVATION ENGINE



GOAL: Ensure RENEW's long-term financial sustainability by leveraging diverse funding sources and revenue streams to advance the circular blue economy.



ACTION → Increase the size and diversity of funding sources for RENEW, including research and industry consortia membership, philanthropy, and state and local funding.



ACTION → Adopt business models for RENEW activities that take advantage of opportunities for revenue; implement models that maximize benefit to RENEW and our coalition.



ACTION → Establish an intellectual property strategy that attracts investment in technologies and products developed or supported by RENEW, and explore pathways to secure equity positions in startups that could lead to long-term returns.



HOW WILL WE KNOW IF WE'RE SUCCEEDING?

Understanding the Stakes & Measuring Impact

The Stakes

The Great Lakes Region is at a pivotal moment. Our abundant freshwater, world-class research institutions, manufacturing strength, and growing water innovation ecosystem give us a unique opportunity to lead the transition to a circular water economy by developing solutions to the water challenges our communities and industries increasingly face.

How we manage water will shape our ability to attract and sustain industry, protect public and environmental health, create good jobs, strengthen supply chains, and build long-term resilience. The opportunity before us is significant, but not guaranteed.

No single organization or sector can address these challenges alone, and fragmented efforts will only slow progress. RENEW brings together a powerful coalition of research, industry, investment, workforce, policy, and community partners to accelerate solutions, create new economic value from water, and strengthen the long-term resilience of the Great Lakes.

Evaluation & Learning

This is an evidence-based strategy informed by a rigorous external evaluation of work to date. We're learning as we grow, and will continuously refine and adapt our strategy to respond to new information about our work and the landscape we operate in.

Given the complexity and long-term nature of our efforts, our strategy will likely shift over time to respond to new information and evolving landscapes. Leveraging an annual external evaluation, we commit to an evaluation practice that explores three core ideas, **accountability, learning, and agility**:

- ✓ **Accountability:** Are we delivering on our commitments and meeting our goals and milestones?
- 📖 **Learning:** What are we learning from our work, our partners, and the communities and markets we serve?
- 🔄 **Adaptation:** What should we change based on what we are learning and how the landscape is evolving?

This plan reflects our agility and commitment to building not only a learning organization, but a learning ecosystem. In an ecosystem of actors working together to advance shared goals, collective learning that is shared and distributed among partners supports a continuous understanding of the issues, potential solutions, and collective approach over time.

Evaluation findings are informing strategic adjustments and program improvements while honoring the expertise of our partners. Additionally, local partners who work directly with communities across the region provide critical insights about what resonates with their communities, which engagement methods work best for their populations, and how regional economic conditions affect program outcomes. **This continuous feedback loop enables us to be an agile organization and coalition, and adapt this strategy as contexts evolve.**



JOIN THE MOVEMENT

Towards a circular blue economy in the Great Lakes region

THANK YOU TO OUR RENEW PARTNERS

Partners Throughout the Years



CONTACT US:

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STAY CURRENT



SUPPORT OUR WORK





GREAT LAKES RENEW



THANK YOU!

Current

APPENDIX: WHAT IS THE BLUE ECONOMY?

We reference the blue economy a lot in this plan! In case you're unfamiliar, here's a quick deep-dive on what it means.

The **BLUE ECONOMY*** is an interconnected supersector for which water is a critical market driver. The blue economy includes:

THE WATER CLUSTER:

The collection of companies and organizations that develop and provide technologies, products, and services to manage the movement, quality, and use of water.

INPUTS AND SUPPLIERS:

Companies and organizations that provide essential products and services to the water cluster and end users.

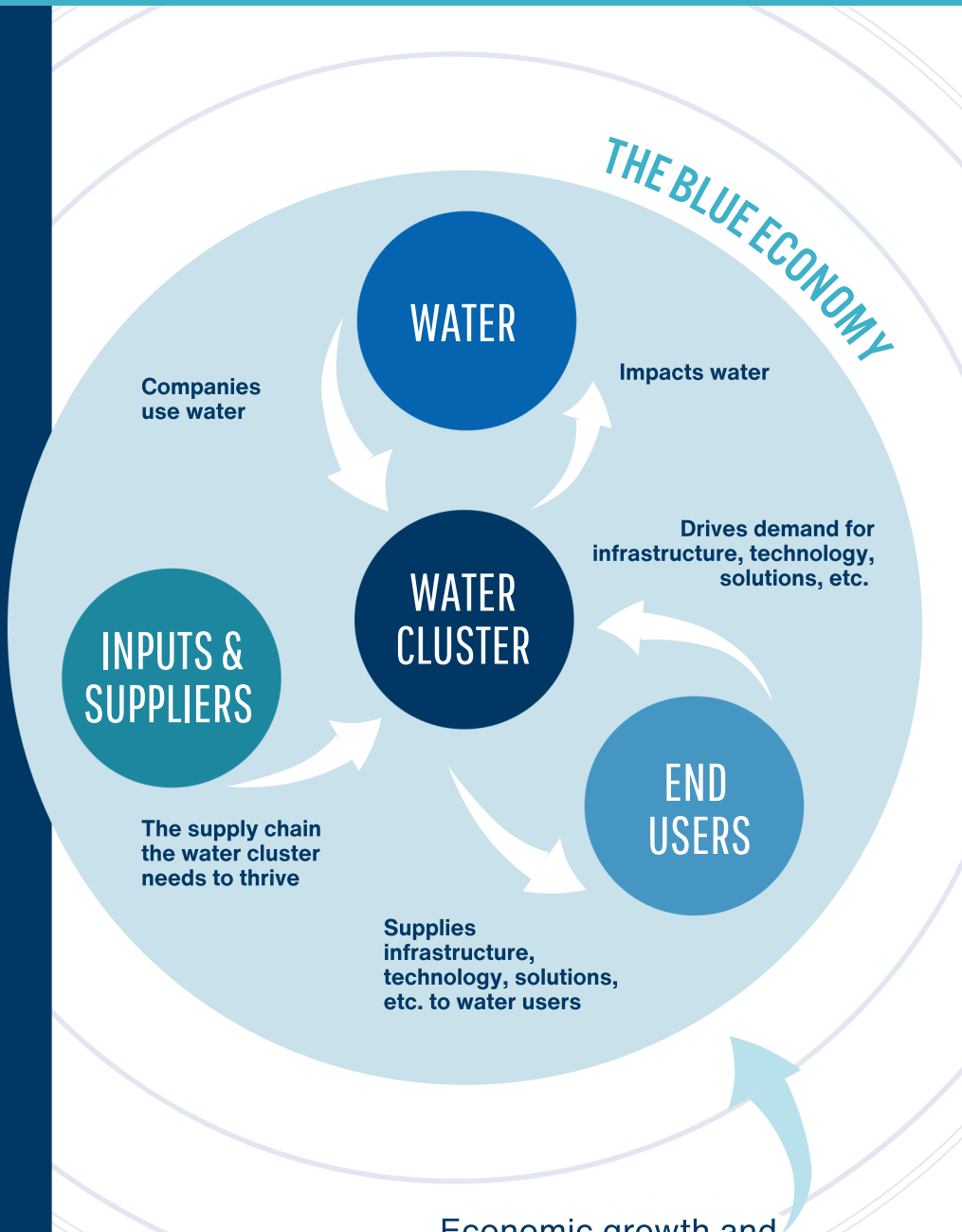
END USERS:

Companies and organizations in industries that drive demand for both water and water solutions, including manufacturing, computing and data storage, agriculture, energy, etc.

And WATER ITSELF:

An economic, environmental, and cultural resource.

*These definitions were developed by authors of the **Upstream Illinois: Strategies to Boost Illinois' Blue Economy (2023)**. There are many definitions for blue economy used by organizations across the U.S. and the world, many of them broad and focused on marine or ocean economies. This definition was used to guide economic development efforts within the Great Lakes Region. It is expected that over time, the definition may need to evolve as the uses of water and the needs of end users evolve.



Economic growth and environmental sustainability are often framed as adversarial goals. But a **CIRCULAR BLUE ECONOMY** turns waste into wealth, generating economic opportunity that benefits both people and the environment.