



Walton Family Foundation **Freshwater Initiative Strategy**

This document summarizes the five year strategy for the Walton Family Foundation’s Freshwater Initiative. This strategy was adopted by the Foundation’s Board in July 2009. The Freshwater Initiative is a component of the Foundation’s Environment Program. The **Environment Program’s primary objective** is to achieve lasting conservation outcomes in ocean and river systems that benefit both people and wildlife by aligning economic and conservation interests.

The **Freshwater Initiative’s primary objective** is to ensure healthy and resilient communities of both wildlife and humans in targeted river systems. The Initiative accomplishes its goals through economic incentives and other conservation tools, including engaging in demonstration projects, pursuing policy reforms at the federal and state levels, supporting targeted scientific and economic analysis, and advancing communications strategies.

The Initiative’s **geographic focus** is on the Mississippi and Colorado River Basins. Support for projects outside of these two Basins will only be considered if they will be useful to advance the development or implementation of tools that are important for accomplishment of the Initiative’s objectives within the two core geographies.

In order to accomplish the Initiative’s objective, a healthy river system needs **four core components**:

1. **River flows** that are appropriate in both quantity and timing for wildlife, while providing sufficient water for sustainable human uses;
2. **Water quality** that is healthy enough for both human and wildlife uses;
3. **Riverside habitat** that enables resilient wildlife communities and recreational access for people; and
4. **Built infrastructure** (such as dams, levees, riverside buildings, *etc*) that is designed to utilize the river in a manner that minimizes impacts to rivers and wildlife.

The Foundation’s strategies in the Colorado and Mississippi River Basins are organized around these four core components. In the Colorado, WFF will work to address river flows and riverside habitat objectives, with supporting work related to built infrastructure. In the Mississippi River Basin, WFF will work to address water quality, riverside habitat and built infrastructure objectives.

The Walton Family Foundation is proactive about inviting organizations to apply for grants. The Foundation does not accept unsolicited grant proposals.

COLORADO RIVER

The **primary objective** of the Foundation's work in the Colorado River Basin is to ensure healthy and resilient communities of both wildlife and humans in the Colorado River Basin through improved river flows and riverside habitat.

River Flows Strategy

The objective of the Colorado River flows strategy is to improve the amount and timing of river flows dedicated to instream purposes both basin-wide and in priority tributaries.

The Foundation works on river flow issues at two scales in the Colorado River Basin. First, WFF works at the **tributary scale** to increase instream flows. This enables development of replicable models that can be used in other tributaries, and builds public and political momentum towards broader scale solutions. The Foundation has initiated its tributary work in the following river basins:

- The Gunnison River (CO),
- The Dolores River (CO, UT),
- The Escalante River (UT),
- The Verde River (AZ),
- The San Pedro River (AZ), and
- The mainstem Colorado Delta region (AZ, CA, MX).

Second, WFF also works on a **basin-wide scale** to ensure that instream flow needs are a component of any large inter-basin water transfer and a part of any regional water policy decisions. As water needs increase and water supplies remain constant or decrease, water reallocation decisions (both through transfers and policy decisions) are critical decision points to protect and improve river flow conditions. WFF works with other foundations, conservation groups and government officials to ensure that interests in favor of improved instream flows are aligned and have a strong voice in basin-wide water discussions. WFF also supports efforts to develop sustainable funding sources in order to ensure that sufficient water for instream needs is available into the future.

Riverside Habitat Strategy

The objective of the Colorado River riverside habitat strategy is to improve the quality of riverside habitat in priority tributaries and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of riverside habitat improvement efforts basin-wide.

WFF focuses its riverside habitat work primarily on removing invasive plants and encouraging the regrowth of native vegetation, particularly the removal of tamarisk trees. WFF engages to a limited extent on other riverside habitat issues where they are important in its priority tributaries, such as exclusion of livestock from riverside areas and prevention of harmful residential development on riverside land.

WFF has initiated its on-the-ground riverside habitat work in the following Colorado River tributaries:

- The Dolores River (CO, UT),
- The Escalante River (UT),
- The Verde River (AZ),

- The San Pedro River (AZ), and
- The mainstem Colorado Delta region (AZ, CA, MX).

WFF has established core principles for its work on invasive plant issues in the Colorado Basin, which are available upon request. WFF also promotes the establishment of sustainable funding sources for addressing invasive vegetation issues to ensure that methods demonstrated by WFF's projects can be replicated throughout the Colorado Basin.

Built Infrastructure Strategy

The objective of WFF's built infrastructure work in the Colorado River Basin is to support WFF's flows and riverside habitat objectives in the Colorado River Basin by improving the operations of current dams in the Basin and increasing the efficiency of water use.

WFF invests in built infrastructure efforts only in the priority tributaries where the Foundation is focusing its flows and habitat work. Where appropriate in these tributaries, WFF: (1) identifies and promotes water-efficient practices and technologies to stretch water resources to accommodate human needs while ensuring sufficient instream flow for fish, wildlife and recreation; and (2) promotes the timely review of dam operations to ensure that dam operations not only meet water users' needs, but also address the instream water needs of fish, wildlife and recreation.

MISSISSIPPI RIVER

The **primary objective** of the Foundation's work in the Mississippi River Basin is to ensure healthy and resilient communities of both wildlife and humans in the Mississippi River Basin through improved water quality and riverside habitat, and through greening the River's built infrastructure.

Water Quality Strategy

The objective of the Mississippi River water quality strategy is to achieve long-term reductions in nutrient runoff from agricultural lands in the key watersheds that make the largest contribution to the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Foundation believes that achieving reductions in nutrient runoff necessary to address the Gulf dead zone is inextricably tied to national agricultural and food policy. In an effort to improve the environmental outcomes from row crops agriculture in the Upper Mississippi River Basin, WFF pursues two approaches. First, WFF works to improve targeting and implementation of agricultural conservation programs in the existing Farm Bill, as well as to ensure that new technologies and practices that prove successful in reducing nutrient runoff are eligible for federal Farm Bill funding.

Second, in the most environmentally sensitive areas, WFF works to develop markets for crops and practices that can improve water quality while keeping farm land in agricultural production and reducing farmers' reliance on traditional farm subsidies. To promote this change, the Foundation works to: (1) Identify and demonstrate the environmental and economic outcomes of new crops and practices; (2) Reduce key technological and logistical barriers to access markets for these crops; and (3) Promote the development of markets for the environmental services that these crops will provide.

This effort is targeted to key, small agricultural watersheds in Iowa, Wisconsin, Indiana, Minnesota and Illinois.

WFF will distill the lessons learned from this work and educate federal decisionmakers who can incorporate more effective tools for managing runoff into the Farm Bill over the next two cycles. (The Foundation does not support lobbying activities.)

Riverside Habitat Strategy

The objective of the riverside habitat strategy in the Mississippi River Basin is to increase healthy bottomland hardwood forests in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley and support the development of ecologically-compatible income streams for landowners and communities based on that habitat.

WFF's strategy is grounded in the notion that natural resources conservation should power economic development in an economically depressed region because natural resources are better managed when they contribute to the local community. Thus WFF's strategy in the Delta involves two components: (1) Promoting reforestation by leveraging financial incentives to facilitate a voluntary transition from row crop agriculture to bottomland forest in areas that experience frequent flooding; and (2) Assisting landowners and communities in developing income streams based on the sustainable use and management of those resources.

The Foundation funds efforts to leverage current Farm Bill programs and emerging carbon markets to encourage reforestation of frequently flooded agricultural land. WFF also provides guidance to help landowners and local communities to maximize economic benefits of the reforested land in a way that is compatible with the ecological values. The Foundation focuses on developing opportunities for nature tourism because it holds potential to provide economic development benefits not only to landowners but also to neighboring communities.

Reforestation work is concentrated in Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana where there are sizable acreages of frequently flooded agricultural lands in proximity to existing forest blocks.

Greening Built Infrastructure Strategy

The objective of the Foundation's greening built infrastructure strategy in the Mississippi River is to promote the use of natural systems, such as restored wetlands and active floodplains, to provide needed infrastructure for urban and rural communities.

WFF works to promote the adoption at federal and state levels of natural-systems approaches for infrastructure projects in three ways. First, WFF supports the development of both the ecological management tools needed for natural systems approaches and the analysis of the costs and benefits of their use. Second, WFF supports coordination and engagement with the federal, state and local agencies that are responsible for managing infrastructure to push for these natural systems approaches to be employed in new and existing projects for flood control, hurricane protection, drinking water and other infrastructure projects. Third, WFF supports the outreach and education needed to develop public, political, and financial support for natural systems approaches.

WFF's work on green infrastructure is currently focused on wetlands restoration for flood control and storm surge protection in Coastal Louisiana. This green infrastructure work may be expanded beyond Coastal Louisiana in the later years of the Foundation's five year strategy