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Reflecting on Six Years of Tree Corps

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Ecology Action Center's Tree Corps program has completed its 6th tree planting season, and we are reflecting on our successes and our hopes for future seasons. To our knowledge, there is no other tree planting program like ours in the country as far as scale and ambition: planting 10,000 trees every year with only one dedicated staff person, almost entirely with the help of volunteers. Over 43,000 trees have been planted so far, and the landscape in McLean county will be forever greener as a result. If only 50% of our trees reach maturity, we will still have added almost 50 million square feet of canopy cover, and sequestered 439 million pounds of carbon dioxide. An estimated 3 million pounds of cumulative air pollution will be removed, improving our air quality at schools, residential areas, and along the interstate highway. These trees will also reduce the impact of flooding events, with an expected 863 million gallons of avoided storm water runoff.

A significant challenge to our tree planting approach is survivability; we set our lofty goals knowing that survival is variable without invasive plant species management or watering capabilities at most of our projects. We also are racing against a planting clock, as seedlings can only be planted during the spring rainy season, which is only a matter of weeks.

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Reflecting on Six Years of Tree Corps *(continued)*

As we look to increase the survival of our trees, we have reset expectations from planting 10,000 trees to 6,000 trees per year, with the intention of spending more time on site preparation and follow up. We hope that this adjustment will result in greater tree survivability, ensuring long term benefits and sustainability of the program.

On a personal note, I am regularly in awe of the dedication of our volunteers, the generous advice and expertise offered by community members, and the ethos of helpers everywhere I look. The work we are doing is as challenging as it is worthwhile and impactful. I hope the shift in our yearly planting goal can be understood not as a reduction of the program, but a more grounded approach based on lessons learned.

We need your help and support to plant 6,000 trees in 2027! Will you do your part and make a donation to Tree Corps? All donations big and small make a difference. You can read more about the program and donate at Tree-Corps.org.

-Tess Wallace, Tree Coordinator

Where Does my Drinking Water Come From?

Where you live in McLean County doesn't just determine your taxes, but also where your water comes from and what contamination threats exist. Residents of Normal get their drinking water from the Mahomet Aquifer, shown as the shaded in area on the map. This aquifer provides drinking water to nearly one million people across East-Central Illinois, supplying about 100 million gallons of water every day[1]. Due to its importance, the Mahomet aquifer was designated as a sole source aquifer in 2015 by the Environmental Protection Agency. This designation means that "contamination of the aquifer would create a significant hazard to public health and there are no physically available or economically feasible alternative sources of drinking water to serve the population that relies on the aquifer"[2].

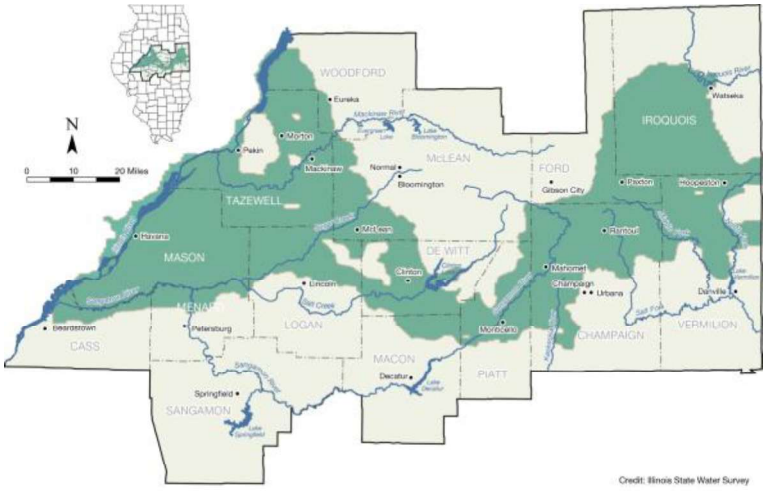


Image from the Illinois Water Survey

Due to its sole source designation, communities have repeatedly come together to protect it from potential threats. One early example was community opposition to the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) waste at the Clinton Landfill, which sits atop the aquifer. Although PCBs were banned in 1979 because of their known risks to human and environmental health, concerns over their disposal persisted[3]. In 2014, following concerns raised by Illinoisians, Governor Pat Quinn directed the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to take action to block PCB waste disposal at the Clinton Landfill[4]. More recently, Illinois passed a law in 2025, after significant public support, prohibiting carbon sequestration projects in areas overlying sole source Aquifers, such as the Mahomet Aquifer[5]. Today, concerns about the potential impacts of hyperscale data centers on local water resources have also prompted public discussion leading Champaign County to place a year-long moratorium on new data centers in their community[6].

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Where Does my Drinking Water Come From *(continued)*



Unlike Normal, residents of Bloomington get their drinking water from surface water sources rather than an underground aquifer. The City's water comes from two artificial lakes, Lake Bloomington, built in 1929, and Evergreen Lake, built in 1968[7,8]. Bloomington regularly monitors and treats its drinking water to ensure it meets federal and state safety standards. However, surface water sources are vulnerable to contamination and other water quality problems as pollutants easily enter through stormwater runoff.

One of the major pollutant concerns identified in the Lake Bloomington and Evergreen Lake watershed management plan is excess nitrogen and phosphorus, likely coming from fertilizer runoff. These nutrients can contribute to algal growth and harmful algal blooms which change the taste and smell of the water[9]. Some algae blooms can produce toxins that are harmful to people and animals. Bloomington has treated portions of its lakes for algal growth and has also used powdered activated carbon to help address taste and odor problems[10]. For Bloomington residents, protecting drinking water starts before the water reaches the treatment plant: keeping pollutants, nutrients, and sediment out storm drains protect the community's water supply.

With a few exceptions (such as Hudson) most residents of McLean County small municipalities or unincorporated areas obtain drinking water from private or community groundwater wells. Unlike municipal water systems, private wells are generally the responsibility of the property owner. That makes regular testing especially important. Testing can identify contamination that may not be visible, or detectable by taste or smell. For many private wells, testing for nitrate and coliform bacteria is a good starting point. Nitrate can enter groundwater from sources such as fertilizers, manure, and septic systems. High nitrate exposure can cause methemoglobinemia, commonly known as 'blue baby syndrome', in infants. Research has also found that long-term exposure to nitrates in drinking water increase the risk of colorectal cancer and thyroid disease[11]. Coliform bacteria, may of which are not harmful themselves, indicate that a larger contamination issue has occurred such as fecal Coliform or *E. Coli*, which can increase your risk of water-borne illnesses[12].

Private well owners can have their water tested through a certified laboratory, such as Daily Laboratories in Peoria. If testing reveals contamination, residents should contact the McLean County Health Department for guidance and additional assistance. Residents who want to better understand how their well works and how to protect their drinking water can also take a free educational class through PrivateWellClass.org.

Whether your drinking water comes from an aquifer, a lake, or a private well, protecting the source is one of the most important ways to protect public health as contamination can be difficult and expensive to remove. Learn more about protecting our local drinking water sources at mCLEANwater.org.

Submit a trash pickup location:
ecologyactioncenter.org/mcleanup
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A View of Berlin's Sustainability

By EAC Intern Grace Haack

Over the summer, I had an opportunity to travel to Berlin with Illinois State University's Office of Sustainability for a sustainable city tour. This opportunity was open to all students, no matter what major, as a chance for us explore what other countries, like Germany, are doing in regards to sustainable practices. During my time in Berlin, I learned about the large initiatives including "greenifying" Berlin's architecture, creating large-scale zero waste events, and promoting the use of foot and bike traffic by replacing parking spots with gardens; and the smaller initiatives including a properly educated community on recycling resulting in less contamination and the usage of reusable cups offered by large scale restaurants that Berlin is taking to become a more sustainable city.



Image by Grace Haack

As an American in Berlin, I, of course, had to try Berlin's McDonald's. Fast food in Berlin is both very different and very similar to the fast food in the United States. Looking at the image on the right you wouldn't be able to tell that this is a German McDonalds (minus the fry shape) but if we zoomed out you would see the many organics bins located throughout the city that collect the compostable lids and leftover food. These organics bins are not only seen throughout Berlin, but are common in one's own residence and serviced regularly by Berlin's waste management system[1]. Most fast-food restaurants not only utilize compostable items but now have an option for a reusable cup which you give back to the staff for a deposit (normally around 2 euros). This idea of a deposit is not new for Berliners, as glass and plastic bottles have already been a part of the deposit system for many years[2].



Image by Grace Haack

Berlin, like many other European cities, creates an environment that promotes shared roads between cars, bikes, and pedestrians. There are separate pathways for each of these modes of transportation with additional space for parking one's bike. While there certainly were car users, I saw many people using public transportation, bikes, or walking. According to a recent article by The Berliner, Berlin only has about 334 cars per 1,000 inhabitants[3]. While this number does change from district to district, overall Berlin has a lower number of cars than comparable U.S. cities like Chicago which completes over 75% of their transportation via cars[4].

To help promote the use of foot and bike traffic, some districts (similar to boroughs in New York) are turning parking spaces into green spaces. In the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, many curbside parking spaces have been turned into community gardens, sitting spaces, green art installations, and more. This started with complaints from the citizens that there was not enough green space, which then became a city sponsored, community-wide project. These green spaces reduce car traffic and carbon emissions within these neighborhoods, while also creating natural spaces in places that were otherwise fairly urban.

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Berlin Sustainability *(continued)*

This experience made me realize that Berlin is striving towards a greener and more carbon neutral city – and they are succeeding! Berlin does this with legislation (such as their carbon neutral by 2050 legislation), community action, and individual action. The effort does not come from just one part of the community, but every part, at every level. Though this might seem farfetched for a lot of us in America, Berlin is an example that it is possible with a little bit of effort and a little bit of life-style change. Berlin's sustainable practices are not an impossibility, but an example of forward progress and hope in the world of environmental sustainability.

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