In 2005, Freshwater began reimagining its mission. It convened a Guardianship Council to recommend the next strategic direction for the organization. The resulting “Water is Life” report identified groundwater protection and nonpoint pollution as key issues for the future.

In 2008, Minnesotans passed the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, providing new funding for water resource stewardship. Recognizing the need to take on more of an advocacy role, Freshwater restructured, splitting into a private foundation and a public charity.

Freshwater’s citizen education programs expanded in 2009 as Freshwater took on the Healthy Lakes and Rivers Partnership (HLRPP) to help citizens clean up their lakes. The following year Freshwater and the University’s College of Biological Sciences instituted the Moos Family Lecture Series, free public talks on emerging scientific topics. In 2011 the organization launched MN FarmWise to encourage ag practices that reduce runoff. The Master Water Stewards volunteer program began in 2013 to engage citizens in grassroots work to improve water quality.

Then, on March 5, 2014, founder Dick Gray died at age 95. That same day, Cargill it decided would not renew its lease. Freshwater made the difficult decision to sell the building that had been integral to the community and Freshwater’s history.

Imagine two futures for Minnesota.

In one, pristine groundwater and sparkling blue streams feed lakes and rivers populated by healthy native species. Urban and rural residents alike enjoy abundant, clean drinking water. Industry, agriculture, individuals and ecosystems thrive.

In the other, chemicals pollute once-pristine waterways, invasive aquatic species cost billions each year in control measures and lost revenue. Tap water is unsafe to drink and aquifers are depleted. Sediment-filled waterways devastate fisheries and afflict neighbors downstream.

Fifty years ago, Twin Cities businessman Dick Gray was dismayed to see Minnesota moving toward the latter. But rather than accept that future as inevitable, he decided to do something. With a handful of friends, he formed the Freshwater Biological Research Foundation, which built the Gray Freshwater Biological Institute. Through science, education, and advocacy, the group brought attention to Minnesota’s incredible water assets and harnessed science to protect them.
It started on a Sunday morning in February 1968. Dick Gray headed out on iced-over Lake Minnetonka to do some amateur fieldwork. For several years Gray and his friend Hibbert Hill, retired vice-president of engineering with Northern States Power Company, had been tracking temperature, clarity, and other indicators of freshwater well-being on their respective lakes. That day, when Gray finally broke through, he was startled to see water stained bright red by a type of microorganism associated with polluted waters.

Gray wanted to know what was wrong with his beloved lake. He turned to the University of Minnesota to find out, but no one seemed to know. So, in collaboration with Hill, Richard Caldecott, dean of the University’s College of Biological Sciences, and Carroll Crawford, publisher of Sun Newspapers, he established the Freshwater Biological Research Foundation on December 31, 1968.

The foundation enlisted community support to build the very first freshwater biology lab in North America. More than 30 corporations and foundations contributed a total of $4 million to build the facility. In 1972, they broke ground at Navarre in Orono near Lake Minnetonka. By 1974, the building, designed by noted Twin Cities architect Elizabeth “Lisl” Close, was still in publication. Laying the foundation

The purpose of the new 52,000-square-foot facility was to provide the University of Minnesota an arm for research and graduate education on topics such as nitrogen fixation, connections between asbestos and cancer, and strategies for controlling algae. The building hosted freshwater biology research for 20 years.

Though primary emphasis was on research, the Foundation continued to advance the cause of freshwater by sharing science-based information with the public. In the late 1970s it launched the Journal of Freshwater Research and co-sponsored its first international conference, “Water: Our Delicate Life Membrane.” It also began publishing the now-famous Weatherguide calendar, which over the years has conveyed to hundreds of thousands of Minnesota’s the important message that we are among, and a part of, Earth’s natural cycles.

In December 1978 the Foundation established a membership program to continue building community support and to connect more people with science. The following year it held a Year of Water Awareness, convening state agencies and organizations around the common goal of freshwater stewardship.

As the decade turned, the organization was in growth mode, investing funds from membership in research. That fulfilled Gray’s original vision of keeping freshwater research current and accessible.

Full speed ahead (1980-1990)

The 1980s were good years for Freshwater, which by now boasted a national reputation in the world of water resources.

Between 1978 and 1982, the organization helped establish a Wetlands Awareness Week in Minnesota, held national conferences, helped produce TV documentaries, and advised governments. In 1981-82 alone, archives tally 25 publications, 60 speeches, and 20 conferences and seminars. Other activities of 1982 included testifying before the U.S. Senate and contributing to the development of the Metropolitan Surface Water Management Act by the Minnesota Legislature.

In 1985, the Freshwater board formed BioTrol, a company that received an EPA grant related to degrading pollutants in soil. It also started the national Health and Environment Network and began co-publishing U.S. Water News.

The 1980s brought a growing interest in and concern for groundwater, wetlands, and aquatic invasive species. From 1986 to 1990, Freshwater worked with state and federal agencies and others to improve understanding of the link between agrochemicals and groundwater. This work contributed substantially to the passage of the Minnesota Groundwater Protection Act of 1989. Freshwater also helped pass the Minnesota Wetland Conservation Act of 1991.


In the early 1990s, Freshwater’s focus on groundwater continued. Freshwater developed The Great Lakes Groundwater Information System and convened a national groundwater conference. Other emerging issues of the time included septic systems, lawn care, acid rain, lake levels, water reuse, mercury poisoning, and drinking water safety.

But 1995 brought major change. The University decided to consolidate its activities and moved its research staff closer to campus. They transferred ownership of the building back to the Foundation; the massive facility was suddenly empty, save a handful of staff.

Despite this challenge, two initiatives emerged during this period that helped Freshwater maintain visibility and value to the public. First, Freshwater co-hosted a Road Salt Symposium for peer-to-peer transfer of best practices to minimize road salt use. Second, the organization sponsored a notable water-themed art contest for Minnesota high school students that energized hundreds of classrooms across the state.

Then, in 2002 and 2003, two events brought more hope. A major bequest helped relieve the financial pinch of the building and Cargill began to lease it for use as research laboratories, reviving the facility’s original function.

2000s

The 2000s were good years for Freshwater. The Freshwater board recognized the importance of the Mississippi River and created a new “guardian” program, Freshwater witnesses, to keep an eye on the river’s quality.

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2010 Freshwater launches Witness program.

2011 Freshwater announces its commitment to re-establish a freshwater biology lab in the Twin Cities.

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2013 Freshwater launches Witness program.

2014 Freshwater launches Witness program.

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