



Freshwater co-founder Dick Gray.

A half century in, it's time to celebrate Freshwater's past progress and set our sights on next steps

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.

Thanks in part to our founders' efforts and those of hundreds of others who have followed in their footsteps, freshwater now remains a valued and valuable resource in our state. Many problems that loomed large in 1968 have been reduced or resolved.

Still, as the world has evolved, so have our water woes. In fact, the past half century has been a bit like a game of whack-a-mole: address one problem, another pops up. As a result, the need for vigilance, education, advocacy, and action is as strong today as it was 50 years ago.

Fortunately, so is Freshwater. Even as we celebrate our successes in meeting past challenges, we're working hard to address those most needing attention today: aquifer depletion, water pollution, changing rainfall, and damaging increases in stream flows.

Our hope is that 50 years from now, those who look back at our work today will be able to raise a glass of fresh, clean water to us, as we do today to those who have gone before, and say: job well done, thank you.



Story by Mary Hoff | Photos from Freshwater archives

For more stories and photos, visit Freshwater.org





Fifty Years of Freshwater

Read more and see photos from the past 50 years at freshwater.org.



Laying the foundation (1968-1974)

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 completed and fully paid for, without a penny of public funds.

Research, then outreach (1975-1980)

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* 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 Minnesotans 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 agrichemicals 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.

Big changes (1991-2004)

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.

1968

Freshwater est.

From left, Dick Gray, Richard Caldecott, Carroll Crawford, and Hibbert Hill establish Freshwater Biological Research Foundation.

1970

Freshwater outfits mobile laboratory to provide research functions.

First issue of *Facets of Freshwater* newsletter rolls off the press, which is still in publication.

1972

Civic leaders break ground on 52,000-square-foot multi-million-dollar Gray Freshwater Biological Institute (GFBI) at Navarre in Orono near Lake Minnetonka.

1974

GFBI completed and given to University of Minnesota for PhD student research.

1977

First issue of *Journal of Freshwater* published. First edition of the *Weatherguide* calendar published.

1984

Over the years, GFBI hosts scores of students working to develop careers focused on protecting freshwater resources.

1995

University consolidates its faculty and students to its main campuses, relinquishing ownership of lab.

2008

"Water Is Life" strategic plan of the Guardianship Council lays out Freshwater's vision for a clean water future: enhancing citizen engagement and policy.

2010

Freshwater hosts first Moos Family Lecture, featuring Robert Glennon.

2013

Freshwater launches Master Water Stewards as three-year pilot volunteer program with Minnehaha Creek Watershed District.

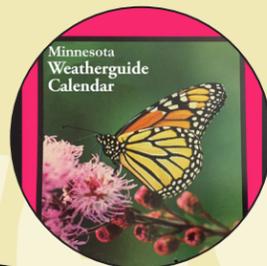
2016

Freshwater publishes series of groundwater reports that drive its policy work. Read and download our reports at freshwater.org.

2018

Freshwater today

Engaging people to protect water for the next 50 years.



A new era (2005–2014)

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 (HLRP) 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 announced it 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.

Moving forward (2015–Today)

Today our main focus is nonpoint pollution and groundwater in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest. Community support is still at the heart of what we do.

Programs begun decades ago continue, joined by additional ones as new community needs arise. Some 400 lake associations have benefited from the Healthy Lakes and Rivers Partnership. The Master Water Stewards program is graduating its sixth class, resulting in more than three million gallons of stormwater redirected and infiltrated annually. Our free Moos lecture series informs and inspires hundreds each year. Our conference and seminar offerings continue to reach thousands. We just published our 43rd edition of the Weatherguide and issued a three-part series of groundwater reports.

Looking forward, we see new challenges: urbanization, climate change, legacy pollutants. But we also see new opportunities: growing interest by farmers to care for water, enhanced connections with policy-makers, and more citizen action for water.

As we celebrate 50 years, we look back with gratitude at the legacy of our founders and all those who make work for water possible.

We look forward to continuing on in the decades to come, so that future generations might also enjoy the priceless benefits of abundant, clean, and healthy water.

Our mission:
**inspire and empower
people to value and preserve
our freshwater resources**

- Our goals:**
- **ensure the sustainability of groundwater**
 - **prevent polluted runoff from harming lakes and rivers**
 - **help citizens and community leaders take their next steps for healthy water**

Pictured, left: Freshwater lab students and staff from 1980s, and right: Master Water Stewards from 2018.



Thanks to the countless people who have made Freshwater thrive these last 50 years!

FRESHWATER

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