IEC50

GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY, EVERGREEN MISSION



DEEP ROOTS, COLLECTIVE POWER

50 Years of Growing Illinois' Environmental Movement

ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL, 1975 - 2025



Acknowledgments

This booklet honors fifty years of collaboration, persistence, and growth. Special thanks to those who shared their insights:

Jen Walling, *CEO* • Delmar Gillus Jr., *IEC Board President + COO of Elevate* • Brian Sauder, *IEC Education Fund Board President + President/CEO of Faith in Place* • Dany Robles, *Senior Director State Government Affairs* • Iyana Simba, *City Government Affairs Director* • Jack Darin, *Illinois Sierra Club Director* • Howard Learner, *ELPC CEO* • Anne McKibbin, *Former IEC Board President* • Jonathan Goldman, *Former Executive Director* • All IEC staff, board members, and partners

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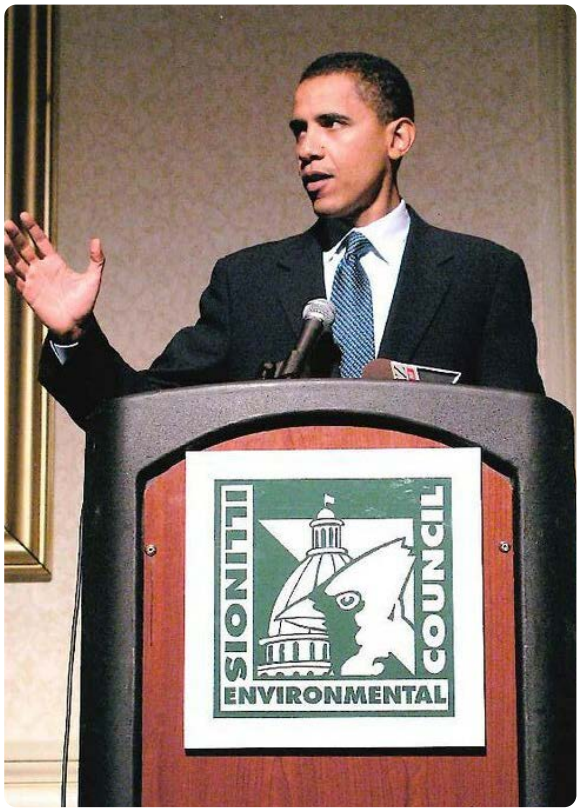
“FOR FIFTY YEARS, THE IEC HAS BEEN A POWERFUL FORCE FOR PROGRESS IN ILLINOIS —BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER TO PROTECT THE HEALTH OF OUR FAMILIES, OUR COMMUNITIES, AND THE PLANET WE SHARE.



“I had the chance to work with the IEC during my time in Springfield, and I saw firsthand how committed you all are to giving citizens a voice—not just in the halls of government, but in every corner of our state.

“Over the years, you’ve given thousands of advocates the tools they need to shape policy and hold their leaders accountable. And together, you’ve helped remove toxic lead service lines, protected our farmland and natural resources, fought for environmental justice, and put Illinois on the path to 100% clean energy.

“It’s a record you should be incredibly proud of. So today, I just want to say thank you for a half-century of progress towards a better, cleaner future for all of us. Here’s to many more.”

— President Barack Obama

It Starts With Soil.

You can't grow anything without healthy soil. That's what Jen Walling will tell you.

As executive director of the Illinois Environmental Council (IEC) for the past fourteen years, Walling has led the organization through its most transformative period. Under her leadership, IEC has grown from a two-person operation in a Springfield basement to a sophisticated statewide organization commanding real political power.

But Walling's favorite metaphor isn't about power. It's about soil.

> **"YOU HAVE TO PREPARE THE GROUND, GET THE RIGHT MIX OF NUTRIENTS AND ORGANIC MATTER, TEND IT CONSTANTLY, BE PATIENT THROUGH SEASONS WHEN NOTHING SEEMS TO BE HAPPENING. THAT'S WHAT IEC HAS DONE FOR FIFTY YEARS. WE'VE BEEN NURTURING THE SOIL OF ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY."**
>
> — Jen Walling, *Executive Director, IEC*

That patient cultivation has produced an extraordinary harvest in recent years: the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA), a nation-leading state climate law. The re-establishment of Chicago's Department of Environment. Investments in water justice. A historic public transit bill. The integration of environmental justice into every aspect of policy work. A coalition of 150+ affiliate organizations working in unprecedented coordination.

This is the story of that cultivation with particular focus on the last twenty years, when seeds planted decades earlier finally bore fruit.



PART ONE: THE FOUNDATION

Thirty Years of Preparing the Ground: 1975-2005

Every harvest begins with someone willing to break ground. In 1973, Jerry Wray traveled to Springfield to lobby for an Illinois Endangered Species Act—and arrived unprepared. No consistent environmental lobby existed in the state capital. No statewide coalition. No institutional voice.

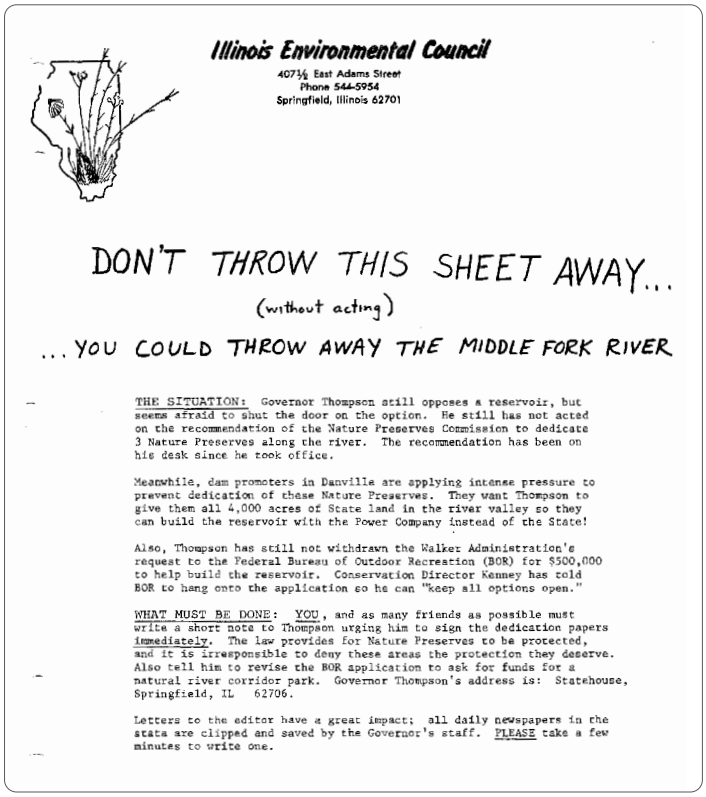
Wray had managed computers at the University of Illinois, but his passion was environmental protection. That 1973 trip changed him. He attended a meeting with Midwestern Sierra Club representatives and learned that neighboring states had statewide coalition offices doing exactly what Illinois lacked. As he later shared in IEC's 30th Anniversary booklet: "I realized there was no consistent, regular environmental lobby in Springfield. At a meeting with Midwestern Sierra Club representatives, I heard about statewide coalitions in surrounding states. I thought, 'Yeah, that would be helpful in Illinois.'"

Wray traveled around Illinois talking with environmental groups about launching a coalition office. With a $15,000 grant from the Illinois Public Action Fund, the Illinois Environmental Council was officially born on February 1, 1975, with Wray as its first executive director.

The First Harvest: A Model is Born

IEC didn't have to wait long to prove its worth. In 1977, just two years after its founding, the organization won its first major victory: stopping a dam on the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. After an intense 10-week struggle, the General Assembly rejected the $5.5 million construction request. An IEC newsletter captured the lesson from that campaign: "The combination of a state-wide letter writing campaign coupled with staff constantly on top of the issue in Springfield, lobbying and getting information to legislators and press has proven highly successful."

It became the model that would define IEC for the next fifty years: grassroots pressure combined with consistent Springfield expertise.



Illinois Environmental Council
407½ East Adams Street
Phone 544-5954
Springfield, Illinois 62701

DON'T THROW THIS SHEET AWAY...

(without acting)

...YOU COULD THROW AWAY THE MIDDLE FORK RIVER

THE SITUATION: Governor Thompson still opposes a reservoir, but seems afraid to shut the door on the option. He still has not acted on the recommendation of the Nature Preserves Commission to dedicate 3 Nature Preserves along the river. The recommendation has been on his desk since he took office.

Meanwhile, dam promoters in Danville are applying intense pressure to prevent dedication of these Nature Preserves. They want Thompson to give them all 4,000 acres of State land in the river valley so they can build the reservoir with the Power Company instead of the State!

Also, Thompson has still not withdrawn the Walker Administration's request to the Federal Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (BOR) for $500,000 to help build the reservoir. Conservation Director Kenney has told BOR to hang onto the application so he can "keep all options open."

WHAT MUST BE DONE: YOU, and as many friends as possible must write a short note to Thompson urging him to sign the dedication papers immediately. The law provides for Nature Preserves to be protected, and it is irresponsible to deny these areas the protection they deserve. Also tell him to revise the BOR application to ask for funds for a natural river corridor park. Governor Thompson's address is: Statehouse, Springfield, IL 62706.

Letters to the editor have a great impact; all daily newspapers in the state are clipped and saved by the Governor's staff. PLEASE take a few minutes to write one.

A 1977 IEC newsletter urges readers to participate in a write-in campaign to protect the Vermilion River.

Power is Relational

That early insight became a discipline, and no one embodied that discipline more than Virginia Scott. Scott joined IEC in 1977 as a newsletter editor, but her role quickly expanded far beyond communications. She would go on to serve as executive director from 1985 to 1997, a period when IEC transformed from a scrappy coalition into a durable, respected force in Springfield. She understood something essential about power building that shaped the organization for decades: You don't just win by being right. You win by being present, persistent, and impossible to ignore.

Scott helped institutionalize that persistence. She ensured IEC was not a campaign-driven organization that surged and disappeared, but a constant presence in the Capitol—tracking legislation, building relationships, and carrying forward institutional knowledge about how Springfield actually worked. She also deeply understood the importance of endurance. Almost nothing moves through the legislature the first time. Bills fail, amendments gut proposals, governors veto.

One of IEC's core strengths under her leadership was the ability to stay in the fight, refining proposals and rebuilding coalitions until success became possible. What looked like persistence on the surface was a deliberate strategy for building power over time.

Scott also recognized that power is relational. She invested heavily in building and maintaining relationships—not only with legislators, but with their staff, agency officials, and the broader ecosystem of decision-makers who shape outcomes behind the scenes. And she never lost sight of where real power comes from. IEC's influence was rooted not in access alone, but in representation—connecting and mobilizing environmental voices from across Illinois. Under her leadership, grassroots groups battling landfills, incinerators, or pollution in their communities were no longer isolated. IEC connected them to each other, to policymakers, and to a broader strategy that amplified their impact.

Earning a Seat at the Table

Virginia Scott set the table for critical victories in the 1980s. Through the 1980s, IEC steadily built its reputation in Springfield. By 1986, that work had earned serious attention at the highest levels of state government. IEC secured a six-hour meeting with Governor Jim Thompson and 25 of his top aides, covering conservation, acid rain, toxics, groundwater protection, and the cleanup of the state's oldest and most hazardous dump. Thompson's response was telling: "The Illinois Environmental Council has demonstrated a deep concern and understanding of the difficult and sometimes controversial issues facing the environmental and conservation communities in Illinois."

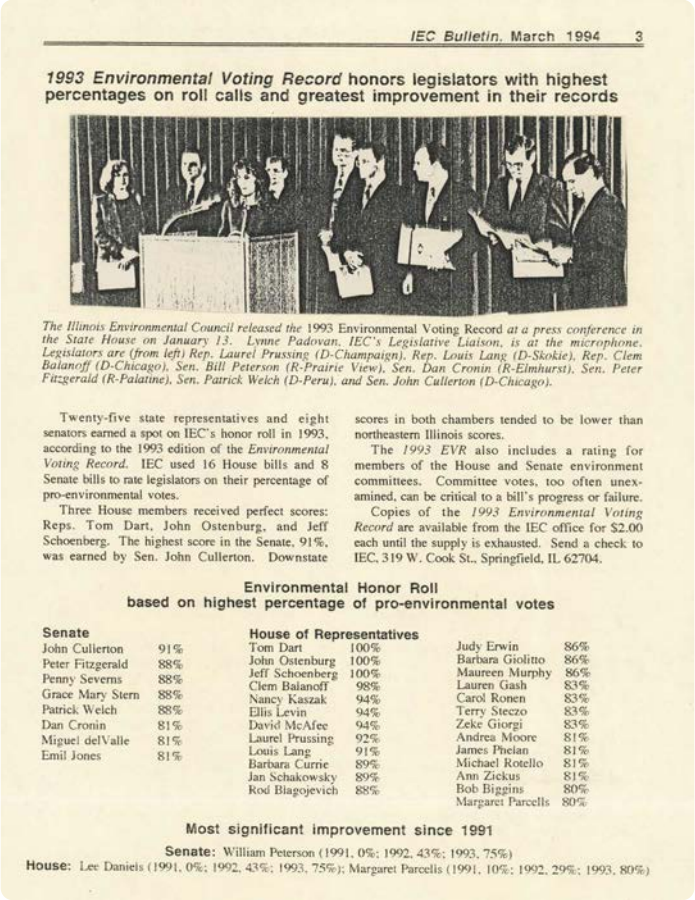
That July, landmark solid waste legislation passed, authorizing $10 million annually for recycling and landfill reduction. It was a tangible result of patient relationship-building and a pattern IEC would repeat for decades. In 1984, the General Assembly had committed $20 million to a three-year hazardous waste clean-up program. In 1989, it dedicated half of the state's annual receipts from the Real Estate Transfer Tax to the Open Space Land Acquisition & Development fund (OSLAD) and the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF), ensuring millions of dollars each year to protect open space throughout Illinois.

The Scorecard: Making Environmental Records Count

Since its inception, IEC has published an environmental scorecard for state legislators, assigning each a score based on how they voted on the most important environmental bills in Illinois. It proved to be one of the organization's most durable tools for accountability.

"Legislators were very proud of their scores," Jonathan Goldman, IEC's executive director from 2001 to 2010, would later recall. "Legislators who cared about the environment made an effort to make sure that they were voting on issues that mattered to their environmentally-conscious constituents."

The scorecard's reach extended beyond Springfield. In 2003, then-State Senator Barack Obama was one of only six state senators to receive IEC's 100% environmental voting record award. He touted his score when running for U.S. Senate, and it even appeared on the Obama for President website. "That was an incredible moment," Goldman recalls, "and showed they took it seriously."



IEC Bulletin, March 1994 3

1993 *Environmental Voting Record* **honors legislators with highest percentages on roll calls and greatest improvement in their records**

The Illinois Environmental Council released the 1993 Environmental Voting Record *at a press conference in the State House on January 13. Lynne Padovan, IEC's Legislative Liaison, is at the microphone. Legislators are (from left) Rep. Laurel Prussing (D-Champaign), Rep. Louis Lang (D-Skokie), Rep. Clem Balanoff (D-Chicago), Sen. Bill Peterson (R-Prairie View), Sen. Dan Cronin (R-Elmhurst), Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R-Palatine), Sen. Patrick Welch (D-Peru), and Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago).*

Twenty-five state representatives and eight senators earned a spot on IEC's honor roll in 1993, according to the 1993 edition of the *Environmental Voting Record*. IEC used 16 House bills and 8 Senate bills to rate legislators on their percentage of pro-environmental votes.

Three House members received perfect scores: Reps. Tom Dart, John Ostenburg, and Jeff Schoenberg. The highest score in the Senate, 91%, was earned by Sen. John Cullerton. Downstate scores in both chambers tended to be lower than northeastern Illinois scores.

The *1993 EVR* also includes a rating for members of the House and Senate environment committees. Committee votes, too often unexamined, can be critical to a bill's progress or failure.

Copies of the *1993 Environmental Voting Record* are available from the IEC office for $2.00 each until the supply is exhausted. Send a check to IEC, 319 W. Cook St., Springfield, IL 62704.

Environmental Honor Roll
based on highest percentage of pro-environmental votes

Senate		House of Representatives			
John Cullerton	91%	Tom Dart	100%	Judy Erwin	86%
Peter Fitzgerald	88%	John Ostenburg	100%	Barbara Giolitto	86%
Penny Severns	88%	Jeff Schoenberg	100%	Maureen Murphy	86%
Grace Mary Stern	88%	Clem Balanoff	98%	Lauren Gash	83%
Patrick Welch	88%	Nancy Kaszak	94%	Carol Ronen	83%
Dan Cronin	81%	Ellis Levin	94%	Terry Steczo	83%
Miguel delValle	81%	David McAfee	94%	Zeke Giorgi	83%
Emil Jones	81%	Laurel Prussing	92%	Andrea Moore	81%
		Louis Lang	91%	James Phelan	81%
		Barbara Currie	89%	Michael Rotello	81%
		Jan Schakowsky	89%	Ann Zickus	81%
		Rod Blagojevich	88%	Bob Biggins	80%
				Margaret Parcells	80%

Most significant improvement since 1991

Senate: William Peterson (1991, 0%; 1992, 43%; 1993, 75%)
House: Lee Daniels (1991, 0%; 1992, 43%; 1993, 75%); Margaret Parcells (1991, 10%; 1992, 29%; 1993, 80%)

A 1994 IEC scorecard

The IEC Model in Action: Retail Rate Law and Beyond

In 1996, IEC achieved one of its most significant early victories: repealing the Retail Rate Law, which had subsidized waste incinerators. The campaign illustrated the organization's collaborative model at its best. Jack Darin, who has served as director of Sierra Club Illinois since 1990 and watched IEC evolve over three-plus decades, describes it plainly: "The Retail Rate Law campaign was perfect. Local groups led organizing, and IEC coordinated statewide. That's how we work best."

The mercury campaign of 2003–2005 showed IEC's patience and persistence working differently. Rather than waiting for a single sweeping bill, IEC worked source by source: a mercury thermometer ban in 2003, mercury switches legislation in 2004, mercury in vaccines eliminated by 2005. Like soil development itself, environmental progress often takes time.

Near the Breaking Point—and a Leap of Faith

For all its successes, IEC nearly didn't survive to see its fourth decade. In the early 2000s, the organization was operating on a shoestring budget, and there was serious talk among the board about whether it could continue. A missed grant application deadline meant losing substantial funding that it was counting on. When Robert Kelter, managing attorney with the Environmental Law and Policy Center (ELPC), took the reins as board president in 2007, he found an organization still showing up in Springfield, still meeting with legislators, still building a green caucus on both sides of the aisle, but teetering financially.

Kelter and the board worked hard to keep the organization afloat. Around 2009, he initiated the launch of a Young Professionals Board—and Jen Walling became a founding member. During his final year as board president, with only a few thousand dollars left in the bank, the board hired Walling as Executive Director. It proved to be one of the best decisions the organization ever made.

These thirty years—from 1975 to 2005—built the foundation. The relationships. The expertise. The trust. The coalition infrastructure. The demonstrated track record. All of it prepared the ground for the harvest to come.

> **"JEN TOOK A LEAP OF FAITH WHEN SHE ACCEPTED THIS ROLE. BUT SHE'S VERY MUCH PART OF IEC'S STORY, AND SHE'S DONE A PHENOMENAL JOB BUILDING IT INTO WHAT IEC IS TODAY."**
>
> **— Rob Kelter,**
> ***IEC former board member***



PART TWO: THE HARVEST

Twenty Years of Transformation: 2005-2025

With that foundation in place, as IEC entered its fourth decade in 2005, significant internal evolution occurred alongside policy victories.

When Jonathan Goldman became IEC's executive director in 2002, he knew he'd walked into a challenging situation, with recent talk among the board that IEC might need to shut down. While the organization was small but scrappy, it was known for its ability to coordinate coalitions and maintain a consistent presence in Springfield. As the lone employee, Goldman accepted the role because he knew IEC had a great reputation among legislators and policymakers.

> **"I LOOKED AT THE SITUATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE A FACILITATOR FOR THE OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS THAT WERE MEMBERS. MY ROLE WAS HELPING BUILD POWER GENERALLY AROUND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT RELATED TO STATE GOVERNMENT."**
>
> **— Jonathan Goldman,**
> ***Former IEC Executive Director***

Building power is one of IEC's superpowers. When then-Governor Rob Blagojevich was threatening to cut funding for state parks and transfer money from dedicated natural resource funds into the state's general funds, IEC partnered with the Partners for Parks and Wildlife, an umbrella for more than 100 conservation, environmental, and outdoor-recreation constituent groups, to put pressure on the governor not to make the cuts.

According to Goldman, IEC helped create a branded campaign around the issue, and while many IEC affiliates were part of the coalition, IEC did something novel at the time and branched out to other groups they knew would be affected by the cuts, including outdoor-recreation groups, to build their power base. The tactic not only worked, it showed those in state government that IEC was becoming a force in Springfield.

Strategic Shifts

Over the next decade, two crucial strategic shifts began.

First, IEC focused on collaboration with its members. The 2011 legislative session saw environmental groups on the opposite sides of major issues, which wasted resources and power. New strategy focused on early collaboration and ensuring that IEC member resources were best directed towards each member's most powerful strategy.

Second, the organization began systematically integrating environmental justice perspectives into all policy work.

Jack Darin serves as director of Sierra Club Illinois and has had a front-row seat watching IEC evolve from a scrappy one-person operation to the powerhouse it is today. He's been involved with IEC since 1990 and says IEC has changed as dramatically as the environmental landscape statewide and nationally has over the past two decades. Just as importantly, he adds, IEC has been at the center of it all, and he credits much of IEC's growth and power to its collaborative spirit that Walling, her staff, board, and members have worked hard to nurture.

> **"PART OF IT IS THE GROWTH OF IEC ITSELF, AND THE EXPANDING STAFF AND NETWORK IN THE ABILITY TO SPEAK ON BEHALF OF A WIDER ARRAY OF ILLINOIS COMMUNITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS. THERE IS AN AUTHENTICITY IN A TRUE STATEWIDE VOICE THAT IEC BRINGS TO THESE CONVERSATIONS WITH POLICYMAKERS."**
>
> **— Jack Darin,**
> ***director of Sierra Club Illinois***

Howard Learner, CEO and Executive Director of ELPC, agrees with Darin and believes IEC's one central, vital role is to be the overall Illinois environmental and conservation community's voice in Springfield with the legislature. Large environmental organizations and groups like ELPC, Sierra Club, and The Nature Conservancy have their own lobbyists in Springfield, who may ramp up or ramp down their legislative presence depending on which issues are top of mind for those groups. But IEC, he notes, should be the constant.

> **"IEC SHOULD BE THE GROUP THAT KNOWS ALL THE LEGISLATORS, FROM DOWNSTATE TO CHICAGO AND THE SUBURBS. IEC IS PLAYING A KEY ROLE ON MOST ENVIRONMENTAL AND CONSERVATION LEGISLATION THAT OCCURS IN SPRINGFIELD AND HAS A LONG-TERM INSTITUTIONAL PRESENCE."**
>
> — Howard Learner, *CEO and Executive Director of ELPC and a former board member of IEC*

Learner is quick to point out that this isn't to say IEC is leading on every issue, but the community writ large needs a constant institutional presence in Springfield with the legislature, and that's the core and vital responsibility and opportunity for IEC.

The Power Shift: From Occasional to Sustained

Darin has worked alongside IEC as it has grown from a coordination hub into the political powerhouse it is today.

"Environmentalists' power in the General Assembly has gone from occasionally significant—you know, we'd have a big win here and there—to sustained power," Darin says. "We're now at an all-time high, and it's sustained, not just occasional. That's a huge difference."

This wasn't accidental. It was the result of deliberate strategy, patient relationship-building, and the cultivation of what Darin calls a 'virtuous cycle.'

"Sierra Club does electoral work, which helps create a pro-environment legislature," Darin explains. "That makes IEC's legislative work more effective. Then IEC's wins make our members more engaged, which strengthens our electoral work. It all reinforces itself."

"IEC doesn't exist in a vacuum or in isolation," Learner adds. "Over the last 20 years, we've all succeeded in building and growing and expanding both the strength and the diversity of the environmental and conservation community in Illinois, and that's a good thing."

As IEC has expanded its staff, capacity, and influence, so too have other organizations, from smaller grassroots environmental justice groups to larger organizations throughout the entire state.

"They're now a part of the community and are engaged, and that overall strength makes everybody collectively more effective," Learner says. "You can't be an effective lobbying process constraint, unless there are some troops behind in many of the districts around the state."

Environmental Justice at the Core

IEC is committed to ensuring everyone's voice is heard and has a seat at the table.

Delmar Gillus, Jr., Chief Operating Officer at Elevate, an IEC affiliate, has been involved with IEC for almost a decade, serving as treasurer before assuming the role of board president. He views his role at IEC as working to make sure that climate justice solutions reach everyone in Illinois, especially Black and Brown communities.

People might be familiar with food deserts, where underserved communities lack access to fresh vegetables, or medical deserts, where communities lack access to quality healthcare. Energy deserts are another form of environmental injustice. Energy deserts exist where people have restricted access to affordable, reliable, and clean power, Gillus explains.

> **"I HAVE SEEN OPPORTUNITIES WHERE THE ENVIRONMENTAL CLIMATE PRIORITIES OF BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES MAY NOT ALWAYS BE THE SAME PRIORITIES THAT GET THE MOST ATTENTION. IEC IS IN A UNIQUE POSITION TO MAKE SURE EVERYONE HAS THEIR VOICES HEARD."**
>
> **— Delmar Gillus, Jr.,**
> ***Chief Operating Officer at Elevate and IEC President***

He cites energy efficiency as one example that has historically been under-supported in some communities. "When you have organizations like IEC partnering with climate justice leaders, you can actually get the priorities of those folks brought to the table and put into legislation."

Through his roles at both Elevate and IEC, Gillus works to bring people to the table to achieve results for all Illinoisans. But he's clear that this work can't be done without Black and Brown communities receiving the real advantages and resources they need.



IEC tables Fiesta del Sol, an annual summer street festival in Pilsen, Chicago.

"WHEN YOU WORK AS A COLLECTIVE, THEN YOU START TO HAVE A VOICE, AND WHEN YOU HAVE A VOICE, THEN YOU CAN MAKE CHANGE. IEC HAS ALWAYS BEEN REALLY GOOD AT BRINGING GROUPS TOGETHER AND COORDINATING."

— Delmar Gillus, Jr., *Chief Operating Officer at Elevate and IEC President*

As the environmental justice movement has grown over the last few decades, IEC has stepped into that role. "We've become that ally, making sure we are finding ways to bring environmental justice voices to negotiating tables and making sure they're part of the policy development process," says Dany Robles, IEC's Senior Director of State Government Affairs. "That's been a big piece of the transformation."

Brian Sauder, CEO of Faith in Place, a longtime affiliate member of IEC, and currently IEC Education Fund (IECEF) Board President, agrees. "The last 20 years have become more people-focused and more justice-focused in our work," says Sauder. "The issue areas are the same, but we've recognized that caring for the environment also means caring for people."

This isn't just a talking point. It manifests in concrete ways: IEC now evaluates every policy through an environmental justice (EJ) lens. The organization works to ensure EJ community voices are at the table from the beginning. Major initiatives include explicit provisions to direct benefits to communities that have borne the brunt of pollution.

Chicago: A New Frontier

In 2021, IEC made a strategic decision that would prove transformative: formalizing its Chicago advocacy work. The city represented untapped potential. Illinois' largest city and the third most populous in the country, with enormous environmental challenges and opportunities, had no consistent environmental advocacy presence at City Hall.

Iyana Simba, who started as an IEC intern in 2018, developed and now leads this work as City Government Affairs Director. "We were trying to, in some ways, mirror what we do in Springfield, but also adjust for the local level," Simba says. "Because Chicago is not Springfield. The politics are different in various ways."

The biggest achievement came in late 2023 with the re-establishment of the Chicago Department of Environment, which had been dismantled over a decade earlier.

"Chicago being a global city and not having a Department of Environment for over a decade was crazy," Simba adds. "From late 2022 to late 2023, we were pretty much just campaigning and advocating. We worked through multiple budget seasons, and we finally got the Department of Environment back."

The campaign demonstrated IEC's ability to apply its Springfield expertise, including its strategic patience and broad coalition building, to city-level advocacy.

Simba didn't stop there. She kept building upon the momentum, and in early 2025, she launched the first-ever Chicago Environmental Lobby Week.

"AS THE ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL MARKS 50 YEARS OF LEADERSHIP, THE CITY OF CHICAGO PROUDLY CELEBRATES A PARTNER THAT HAS HELPED SHAPE A CLEANER, HEALTHIER, AND MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR OUR RESIDENTS. FROM LEADING POLICY EFFORTS TO PROTECT OUR AIR, LAND, AND WATER, TO ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, IEC HAS MADE BOTH OUR CITY AND STATE STRONGER. WITH OUR SHARED COMMITMENT TO BOLD, PEOPLE-CENTERED ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY, WE LOOK FORWARD TO CONTINUING THIS VITAL WORK TOGETHER AND DELIVERING REAL BENEFITS TO CHICAGOANS FOR DECADES TO COME."

— Angela Tovar, *Commissioner and Chief Sustainability Officer, City of Chicago's Department of Environment*



A rally to support the Hazel M. Johnson ordinance, a part of the first Chicago Environmental Lobby Week.

"We took nearly 200 Chicagoans to their Aldermanic offices to talk to them about environmental priorities," Simba shares. "We've done a bunch of Lobby Days in Springfield, but that was the first time it's been done for environmental purposes in Chicago."

IEC often hosts Town Halls and creates fact sheets to share with coalition members, legislators, and the general public, but Simba says this helps empower and mobilize people in new ways in their own backyards. Unlike Lobby Days, which bring people together in Springfield, this engagement allows Chicago residents to make their voices heard and enact change in their local communities.

"I AM SO THRILLED TO WORK WITH ANGELA [TOVAR] TO ADVANCE A ROBUST AND JUSTICE-FOCUSED SUSTAINABILITY AGENDA FOR CHICAGO. THE TIRELESS EFFORTS IN LEADERSHIP AND COMMITMENT THAT HAVE HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT ON THE HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF OUR STATE CANNOT BE OVERSTATED."

— Mayor Brandon Johnson
at IEC's 2023 Annual Environmental Leadership Dinner

Illinois' Path to a 100% Clean Energy Future

While IEC has many milestones to celebrate over its past 50 years, passing the Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) and Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) are arguably the ones that put it on the national map–and Illinois on its path to a 100% clean energy future.

When Anne McKibbin served as board president from 2017–2024, she noticed a marked shift in how the environmental movement at large worked when the groundwork was being laid to pass FEJA.

"The movement changed right as we got through the process of winning FEJA," says McKibbin. "Our ways of working with each other in the movement became much more collaborative, and that really solidified in the process of developing the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) and then passing CEJA."

FEJA was a landmark piece of legislation in Illinois, throwing the state's weight behind the budding renewable energy industry. CEJA doubled down on that commitment, putting Illinois on its official path to 100% clean energy and addressing the climate crisis with a focus on equity, a nation-leading approach.

The work to pass FEJA and CEJA was nurtured over many years. According to Gillus, IEC and its movement partners hosted well over a hundred Listen, Lead, and Share sessions across the state, asking communities directly what they wanted to see in energy legislation. Passing CEJA wasn't a top-down approach. It was alongside the community, working with IEC coalition members to draft policy that reflected the community's priorities.

Passing good policy requires IEC to actively oppose harmful bills and remain steadfast in pursuit of the right solutions.

"One of the things I learned about IEC is that it takes as much strategic strength and as much energy, as much commitment, to stop bad bills as it does to pass good ones," the late Honorable Barbara Flynn Currie explained. "And in the days when I first arrived, there were many efforts to undercut the Environmental Protection Act, to undercut the authority of the EPA, and the Illinois Pollution Control Board, which I chair today. So I was working hard to make sure the bad things didn't happen."

Having the support of Illinois Governor JB Pritzker cannot be underestimated. "When we have an environmentally supportive governor, like Governor Pritzker has been, IEC has more room to operate effectively," says Learner.

In 2021, Walling stood on a podium at the Environmental Leadership Dinner and prepared to give IEC's Milestone Achievement Award, the highest environmental leadership award, to an Illinois governor for the first time in its history: Governor JB Pritzker.

"In 2017, many of us in this room met with Candidate JB Pritzker for the first time at a breakfast. We talked and talked and talked, and he listened. And we said, 'How about 100% renewable energy and equity in a climate bill?'" Walling began.

Pritzker understood what that would mean to the residents of Illinois and later tweeted "100% renewable energy and equity" as a campaign commitment.

Over the years, he did way more than tweet about it. Pritzker worked closely with IEC and its coalition members to not only get this bill done, but also done right.



Governor JB Pritzker accepts IEC's Milestone Achievement Award at the 2021 Environmental Leadership Dinner.

At a key point in the negotiations, Pritzker spoke about the climate crisis and said, "I will not sign a bill that does not match the gravity of this moment."

Pritzker and his team stood with the environment and environmental justice communities as allies, Walling shared that evening. "The governor stood with us to successfully block attempts by the coal and natural gas industry to keep fossil fuel emissions, including climate change, running forever," Walling said. "The governor repeatedly stood with the environment until we could pass a nation-leading climate and equity package."

"We know elections matter," she added. "Leadership matters."

No Climate, No Equity, No Deal

After accepting his award, Pritzker acknowledged the work done years before he joined the office and thanked IEC, members of its coalition, and his team for passing CEJA. "We accomplish nothing without organizations like the Illinois Environmental Council, and all the counterparts working from the grassroots in our neighborhoods, all the way to the U.S. Capitol," Pritzker shared in his acceptance speech.

"Your commitment to coalesce around the values that matter most, and crucially, to see them through, is the reason that Illinois now lays claim to the most ambitious and equitable climate and clean energy bill in the nation," Pritzker noted. "Together we're mitigating the impact of climate change, and we're establishing the most aggressive, clean energy laws in the Midwest, all while supporting and creating thousands of new, clean energy jobs."

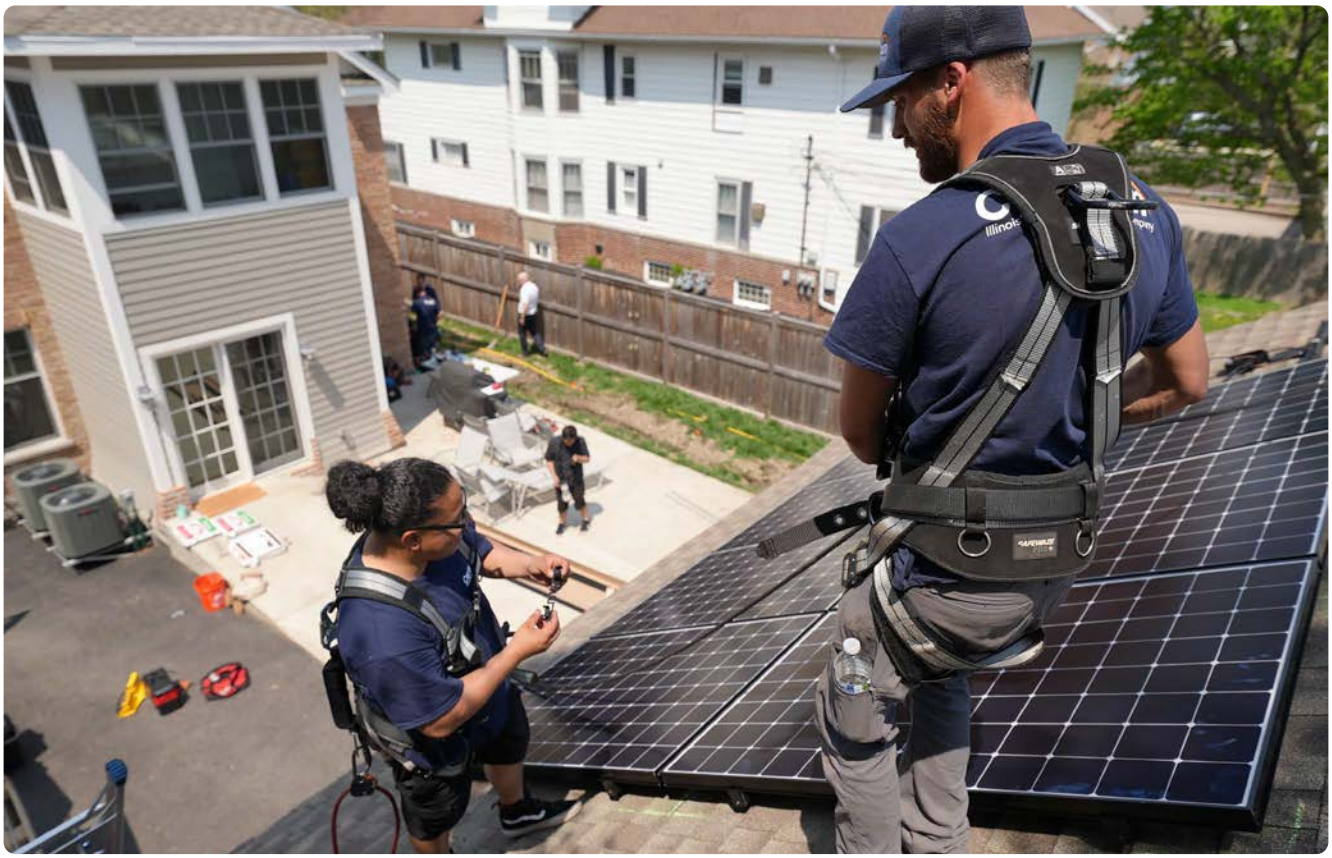


IEC and LCV team up with a local artist to connect with people about the need for climate action at a local farmers market.

Pritzker's work around CEJA wasn't just a one-off environmental project that checked off a box. He's been an ally since before he took office and signed an executive order that made Illinois a member of the U.S. Climate Alliance. But on the stage that night, accepting IEC's Milestone Achievement Award, it was all about how everyone stood together to pass policy that would ensure a safer planet for everyone.

"We're saving lives by reducing carbon emissions, by removing harmful pollutants from the air, by working to eliminate toxic emissions that disproportionately affect minority communities," Pritzker said. "When the utilities and their powerful allies tried to hijack this deal, we said, 'No climate, no equity, no deal.' We meant it, and we won."

Gillus is particularly proud of the work IEC has done around CEJA because it's one issue he's been laser-focused on helping craft and shepherd through the process. Because they meant it when they said, 'No climate, no equity, no deal,' IEC and its partners in the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition were able to pass CEJA with equity provisions intact, making it model climate legislation for the rest of the nation.



Union solar installers benefitting from Illinois' investment in clean energy jobs affix panels during an IEC solar energy home tour.

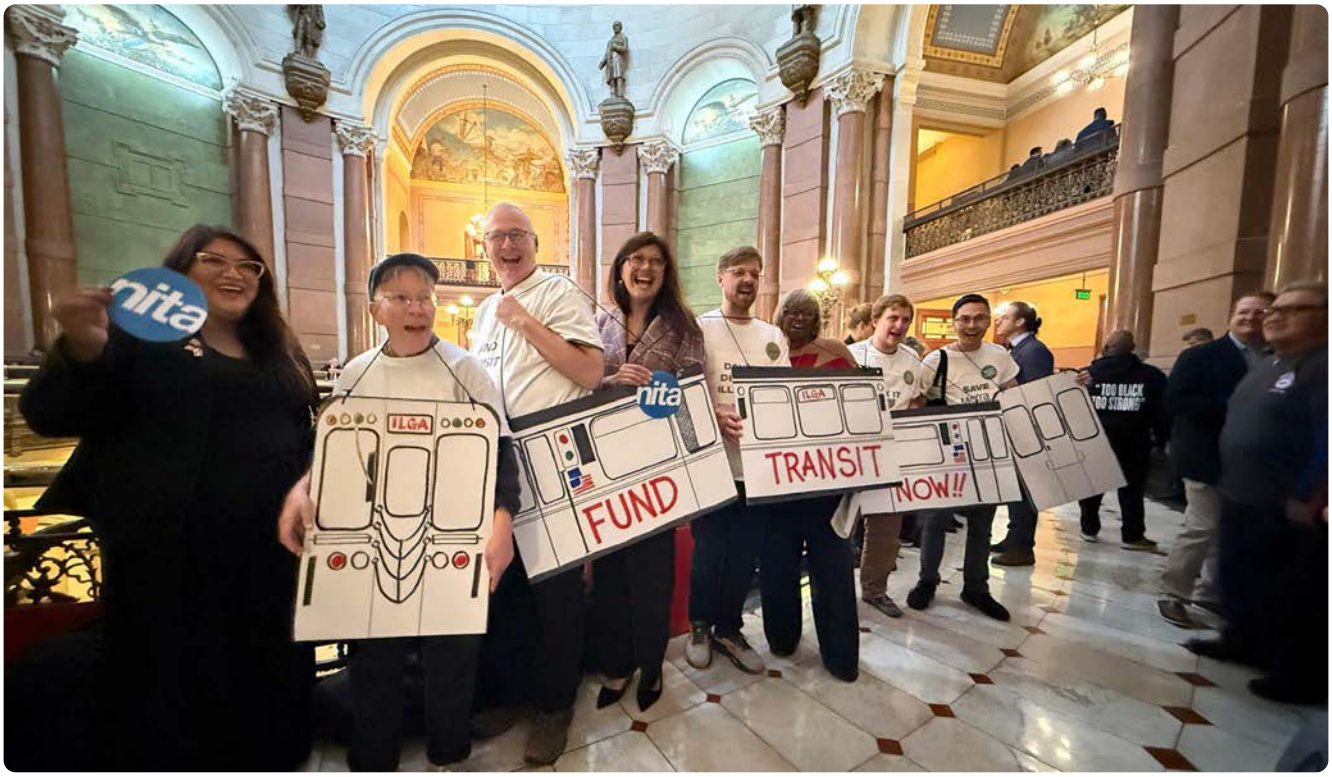
"One of the reasons I appreciate being part of the IEC team is the focus on environmental justice," Gillus says. "When a community member came to me, or a group of community members came to me, and said, 'Hey, this is critically important,' I took great pride in taking that forward to the coalition and then bringing that forward during the negotiations. And to me, that's what IEC is about. It's about listening, it's about moving forward, good ideas, collaboration, and it's ultimately reaching our climate goals, but doing it in a way that is equitable and accessible to everyone."

CEJA is a great example, he adds, of IEC's commitment to environmental justice happening on the ground. "We need to make sure these things are done in a way that meets the best interest of the citizens of the great state of Illinois," Gillus says. "Whether that's economic development associated with solar projects, wind projects, carbon sequestration, all these things, there has to be a lens applied."

Transportation Heats Up

While clean energy bills have received a lot of attention over the past decade, the connection between transportation emissions and climate change has become impossible to ignore. So, IEC's portfolio expanded into this area to meet the need.

"We've really gotten involved in the transportation landscape and made that a component of our environmental work," Robles says. "We've definitely expanded our policy portfolio over the years. Now we're being tapped to lead on policies helping with emissions reduction—zero-emission vehicles, public transit investment, [look at] the connections between transportation and climate."



Lobby Day goers find increasingly creative ways to make the case for clean, reliable public transportation funding under the dome in Springfield.

It's a natural evolution. Climate work requires addressing transportation. Environmental justice work requires addressing transportation access and emissions in overburdened communities. IEC's holistic approach means recognizing these interconnections.

On December 16, 2025, the Northern Illinois Transit Authority Act (NITA) was signed into law. NITA will replace the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) and significantly reform the governance of CTA, Pace, and Metra. It's a commitment to building a stronger, fairer, and cleaner transportation system that everyone can rely on.

From Political Climate to Climate Change

As noted earlier, the 1986 meeting with Governor Thompson's team covered a lot of ground, and it delivered results. Climate change wasn't yet on the table—or even a commonly used term in Illinois environmental work.

Nurturing relationships with legislators who can advance or support policy on environmental issues that include combating the effects of climate change and helping navigate the fact that climate is now at the top of everyone's agenda, and continues today.

McKibbin captures the overarching theme of this era. "All aspects of environmental work have shifted towards climate," she says. "On the conservation side, people are looking at nature-based solutions and how to get more carbon stored in the forests. On the toxics side, we're looking at how pollution impacts climate-vulnerable populations."

This isn't about abandoning traditional environmental work. It's about recognizing that climate change touches everything, and that comprehensive solutions require integration.

There is no question that the political climate impacts how IEC and its members can advance environmental policy.

Going back to Walling's analogy, it's all about laying down roots and nurturing the soil so those roots grow stronger day by day. When the political landscape makes it tougher to pass laws, IEC and its members focus on educating lawmakers and the public. It doesn't matter which political party is leading—it's about making progress and putting things in place to help make change happen.



IEC CEO Jen Walling speaking to hundreds of environmental advocates gathered for the 2025 Climate Day at the Capitol.

Despite President Donald Trump removing regulations on oil, natural gas, coal, and mining, pushing to censor climate science, and defunding or weakening clean energy projects, his administration has not prevented major climate legislation from advancing in Illinois thanks, in no small part, to the power of IEC and its elected leaders.

"Every time we've elected Trump, we've passed a climate bill," Walling says. Soon after Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, Illinois passed the Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA). In 2025, Illinois passed the Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act (CRGA). According to Walling, when those in leadership positions go against our core identity as a state and our values as a state, the state responds accordingly. "We value our government," Walling adds. "We value our government employees."

Illinois has largely insulated itself from federal impact. "The state believes in climate change," said James Jennings, Illinois EPA Director, at IEC's 2025 annual meeting. "We have, by law, an environmental justice officer. The state of Illinois has been able to insulate ourselves from the ebbs and flows of federal environmental policy by having enough of our own infrastructure on the ground."

As IEC has grown in power and staff, other groups and grassroots environmental justice organizations throughout the entire state have become part of an expansive coalition that allows them to make real change.

The last twenty years haven't been without challenges. Federal environmental protections have faced assault. Political polarization has intensified. The pandemic disrupted everything. Still, IEC does what it does best: nurtures the soil and strengthens its base.

The Through Line: IEC as Connective Tissue

"The process of government is closed to the public by design in many ways," says Walling. Why? Because it's much easier to get things done when there aren't as many voices contributing, she says. But easier doesn't always yield the best outcomes. One of IEC's strengths is that it opens those doors, literally and figuratively, "for environmental organizations and individual activists who are passionate and care about the environment and democracy throughout the state to be able to connect with our lawmakers and share why the environmental issue is important to them."

IEC does more than open doors. It educates and empowers individuals to take action for the environmental policies they support. Don't know how to reach or talk to your legislators about issues that matter to you? IEC can help. Want to attend a Lobby Day but don't know where to start? IEC can help. Don't know where your legislator stands on a certain issue? IEC can share their voting records.

"Every individual who cares about the environment in Illinois has an opportunity to join IEC and add their voice to a powerful collective that is heard by our elected officials," says Sauder. Whether it's to learn more about certain issues, how the process works, how to participate in Lobby Days, attend district meetings, or field trips, IEC can help and support.



Passionate advocates meet with their state senator to discuss their top environmental priorities during lobby day.

And not everything needs to take place in Springfield or requires travel throughout the state. IEC hosted five Lobby Days in 2025, but getting involved can also mean making phone calls, signing petitions, understanding the timing of the process, and knowing where elected officials stand on issues that matter most to members and electeds include alderpersons, state senators, state representatives, congresspersons, and United States senators. “This education,” Sauder says, “leads to action and advocacy.”

IEC launched an online Lunch & Learn Series when COVID-19 changed how members could connect with each other and their elected officials. Due to its overwhelming success, it kept the series, and today, according to Robles, the series brings experts to the table to dialogue with residents and legislators on topics of most concern. It’s become a great way for people to get involved and ask their elected leaders questions without having to trek to Springfield.

IEC makes those connections because it knows those connections matter.



Youth from across the state convened on the Capitol for an IEC lobby day.

Darin returns to his earlier observation about IEC being the through line in Illinois’ clean energy arc. “IEC has been the through line in that ten-year arc from FEJA to CEJA to CRGA,” he says. “That consistency matters. IEC was there for all of it, providing the connective tissue between different groups and issues.”

IEC doesn’t act alone, and there are no individual victories. Rather, IEC’s rising tide raises all boats. Working together, the movement wins together. Not just environmental protection, but climate and environmental justice woven throughout.

That sustained power was fifty years in the making.



THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS

Today, the Illinois Environmental Council coordinates a coalition of 150+ partner organizations. The two-person (plus dog) basement office has become a sophisticated operation with its own building in Springfield within walking distance of the Capitol and office in Chicago's Loop with expertise spanning climate, water, transportation, conservation, environmental justice, and city government affairs.

Like McKibbin and Darin, the Honorable Karen May likes to describe IEC as an umbrella. "When it rains, we take our umbrella. Well, let me tell you right now, it is a monsoon coming out of Washington. The EPA is under attack, programs are being cut. We need you to be under the umbrella of IEC to help."

Despite the challenges our environment faces, many IEC board members and staff are optimistic because IEC is in the best position to fight those challenges and advance environmental policies that matter to the residents of Illinois and beyond.

"The passion is there within the environmental community," says Gillus. "When I look at what IEC has accomplished, and the people committed to this work, I'm actually very optimistic about the future."

McKibbin reflects on IEC's growth as a result of Walling's leadership and commitment to the overall movement. "The growth and influence of IEC under Jen's leadership has impacted the entire environmental movement in Illinois," she says. "We're stronger as a movement because IEC is stronger."



“IEC is building power for people and the environment in Illinois,” adds Robles.

Jen Walling returns to the soil metaphor. “For fifty years, IEC has been nurturing the soil of Illinois environmental policy. Now we’re seeing the harvest. But the work of cultivation never stops.”

The next fifty years will require new seeds, new nutrients, constant tending. Climate change demands unprecedented action. Environmental injustices require systemic solutions. Water, air, and land still face threats.

The soil is healthy. The roots run deep. The coalition has never been stronger.

From preparing the ground to harvesting transformative change. From earning respect to commanding power. From a mimeograph machine to sustained political influence.

Here’s to the next fifty years of cultivation.



KEY MILESTONES

1975

Breaking Ground: IEC was founded and Jerry Wray becomes the first executive director.

Jerry Wray was managing computers at the University of Illinois when a 1973 lobbying trip to Springfield, for which he arrived unprepared, opened his eyes to a gap: there was no consistent environmental lobby in Illinois. After traveling the state to build support, and with a $15,000 grant from the Illinois Public Action Fund, the Illinois Environmental Council was officially born on February 1, 1975.

1976

Judy Groves becomes executive director.

1977

The first harvest: Middle Fork River dam defeated.

IEC's first major victory came in 1977, stopping a dam on the Middle Fork of the Vermilion River. After an intense 10-week struggle, the General Assembly rejected the $5.5 million construction request. A newsletter article captured the lesson: "The combination of a state-wide letter writing campaign coupled with staff constantly on top of the issue in Springfield, lobbying and getting information to legislators and press has proven highly successful."

It became the model: grassroots pressure combined with Springfield expertise.

1978



Sandra McAvoy becomes executive director.

Sandra Cole McAvoy led IEC from 1978 to 1982, a period that produced some of the organization's earliest legislative wins. Under her leadership, IEC successfully advocated for tougher penalties on hazardous waste dumping, expanded funding to clean up toxic waste sites, and won greater community input in landfill siting decisions. The organization also helped bring partial funding to the Rock Island Trail, now a beloved corridor for hikers and cyclists across downstate Illinois.

1980

Organizing by grassroots groups in Wilsonville and other small towns beset by hazardous waste facilities and revelations about illegal dumps finally push the legislature to adopt a stiff dumping penalty and provide clean-up funding for toxic waste sites.

1981

Representing a fundamental change in how Illinois carries out its waste programs, "SB 172" gives local citizens a say in the siting of landfills.

1982

Ken Mitchell becomes executive director.

1983

Illinois Non-game Wildlife Conservation Fund passes after two vetoes by Gov. Jim Thompson, providing a steady stream of income for special conservation projects.

1984

In a late-session surprise, the General Assembly commits $20 million to a three-year hazardous waste clean-up program, a compromise brokered when a hazardous waste generator tax could not pass through the legislature.

1985



Virginia Scott becomes executive director.

1986

IEC starts earning respect: Solid Waste Management Fund established.

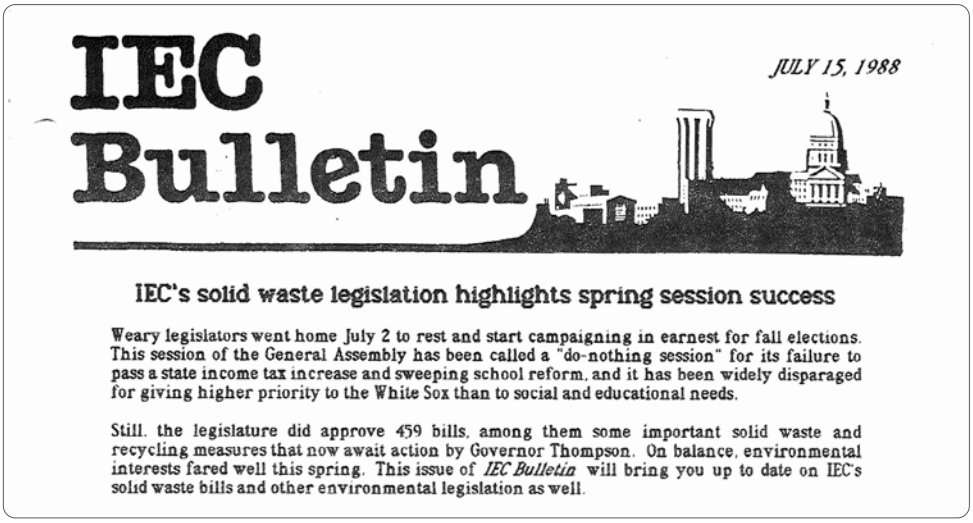
By 1986, IEC had earned serious attention. A meeting with Governor Jim Thompson and 25 of his top aides covered conservation, acid rain, toxics, groundwater, solid waste. Thompson's response: "The Illinois Environmental Council has demonstrated a deep concern and understanding of the difficult and sometimes controversial issues facing the environmental and conservation communities in Illinois."

That July, landmark solid waste legislation passed, authorizing $10 million annually for recycling and landfill reduction.

1987

IEC gets its first computer. The tiny Macintosh cost more than $3,000.

1988



IEC Bulletin

JULY 15, 1988

IEC's solid waste legislation highlights spring session success

Weary legislators went home July 2 to rest and start campaigning in earnest for fall elections. This session of the General Assembly has been called a "do-nothing session" for its failure to pass a state income tax increase and sweeping school reform, and it has been widely disparaged for giving higher priority to the White Sox than to social and educational needs.

Still, the legislature did approve 459 bills, among them some important solid waste and recycling measures that now await action by Governor Thompson. On balance, environmental interests fared well this spring. This issue of *IEC Bulletin* will bring you up to date on IEC's solid waste bills and other environmental legislation as well.

Solid Waste Planning and Recycling Act is passed, promoting recycling, long-range local planning, and model programs within government agencies.

1989

The General Assembly dedicates half of the state's annual receipts from the Real Estate Transfer Tax to two programs, the Open Space Land Acquisition & Development fund (OSLAD) and the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF), ensuring millions of dollars are available each year to protect open space throughout the state.

1991

Gov. Jim Edgar extends a moratorium on issuing permits for developing new hazardous waste incinerators.

1992

The IECEF is part of a four-state team provided a Kellogg Foundation grant for the Great Lakes Citizens' Groundwater Protection Project.

1994

The Safer Pest Control Project is launched with a grant from the W. Alton Jones Foundation. The project is the only organization in Illinois dedicated to protecting children and their families from the serious health consequences of pesticides.

With 60 student members, the Illinois Student Environmental Network begins. Originally a project of IECEF, the network spins off to become its own organization in 1997, eventually including more than 4,000 participants on 100 campuses.

1996

Retail Rate Law repealed. One of IEC's most significant achievements came with repealing the Retail Rate Law, which subsidized waste incinerators. Jack Darin, Illinois Sierra Club Director since 1990, explains IEC's model: "The Retail Rate Law campaign was perfect. Local groups led organizing and IEC coordinated statewide. That's how we work best."

1997

Lynne Padovan becomes executive director.

The Livestock Management Facilities Act requires notification when new "factory farms" are built, paving the way for stricter rules in 1999 concerning storage facilities siting, phosphorus limits and reporting spills.

1999

The state passes laws requiring public schools to notify parents when pesticides are applied—a survey had revealed that 75 percent of school administrators were unaware of the pesticides used in their schools—and to use Integrated Pest Management, a program promoted by Safer Pest Control that prevents infestation.

2001



Jonathan Goldman becomes executive director.

2002

After the legislature cuts in half future funding for open space in the spring session, the IEC and other groups successfully get the funding restored during the veto session.

2003

IEC publishes (jointly with the League of Conservation Voters) the first Illinois Environmental Briefing Book and launches the EnviroBulletin, a weekly e-newsletter.

In a whirlwind spring session, eighteen bills supported by IEC pass the legislature, including a mercury thermometer ban, toughened environmental enforcement measures and an expansion of the school IPM law to cover day care centers as well.



Illinois EnviroNews

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30th Annual Meeting Held at IDNR (page 2)
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Spring Legislative Session Under Way (page 4)

Moving Toward a Mercury Free Illinois

During the last few years, mercury issues are standing out more and more in the environmental arena as states take action to combat the problem of mercury contamination. Mercury is a heavy metal found in the environment from both natural and human sources. However, human activities are leading to excessive and unnatural amounts of the metal in our environment. The largest source of mercury is fossil-fueled power plants which burn mercury-containing materials such as coal. Other large sources include municipal waste combustion and industrial sources.

Widespread Dangers

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin which can cause damage to the central nervous system, especially in infants and young children. Mercury contamination is not only a threat to humans, but is a threat to the environment as well--it can harm the reproductive health of wildlife and already is found in every lake and river in Illinois.

Health hazards from mercury seem to be everywhere in our environment. The federal Environmental Protection Agency announced in early 2004 that more than **one child in six** born in the United States could be at risk for developmental disorders because of mercury exposure in the mother's womb. The US EPA and Food and Drug Administration have issued an advisory for pregnant women and young children to limit fish and shellfish consumption to two to three meals per week.

In addition to these warnings, the US EPA recently released their 2003 National Listing of Fish Advisories. The number of states issuing consumption advisories has steadily risen over the years, and in 2003 the US EPA reported that

Mercury Free Illinois continued on page 7

Mercury: Patient, incremental progress.

IEC's mercury campaign exemplified persistence. Rather than waiting for comprehensive legislation, IEC worked source by source:

- 2003: Mercury thermometer ban
- 2004: Mercury switches legislation
- 2005: Mercury in vaccines eliminated

Like soil development, environmental progress takes time.

2004

Partners for Parks and Wildlife defeats a proposal to redirect dedicated funding for preserving natural resources and parkland in Illinois—the OSLAD and NAAF funds—saving $56 million in funding. A similar battle the next year raises the total protected for conservation to more than $74 million.

When Governor Blagojevich threatened to raid dedicated conservation funds, IEC coordinated the Partners for Parks and Wildlife coalition. “We kept up the drumbeat statewide, varying tactics,” recalls Jonathan Goldman, executive director from 2001-2010. “Citizens told legislators, legislators told leadership these funds are too important to cut.”

The coalition protected $74 million.

2005

IEC celebrates its 30th anniversary.

2006

Green Caucus Formed.

A group of pro-environmental legislators created the new Green Caucus, which is bipartisan and bicameral, with 25 founding members. The caucus was designed to discuss issues and legislation, seek to take caucus positions on individual bills, and establish priorities on legislation. Having such a caucus has given environmental legislation increased stature and visibility, and has been a sign of strong leadership on environmental issues by participating legislators.

2007

Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard passed, requiring Illinois utilities to supply 25% of their power from renewable sources by 2025. Energy Efficiency Portfolio Standards also passed that year required utility companies to reduce their overall electric usage by 2% by 2015. These provisions will reduce global warming emissions by tens of millions of metric tons every year and save Illinois consumers roughly $2 billion by 2020.

2008

Electronic Waste Products Recycling Act passed.

This legislation requires electronics manufacturers to collect and recycle or reuse electronic waste while banning it from landfills. Since 2013, manufacturers of electronic products in Illinois must recycle or reuse an amount equal to 50% of the weight of what they sell each year. In 2015, this Act was amended to instate incremental increases for electronics manufacturers' annual recycling weight goals.

2009

Permit requirements for Commercial Food Scrap Composting are lowered, making this type of business more feasible for Illinois. Permit requirements were removed for urban farms and small-scale composting sites in 2013. In 2015, an amendment to the Environmental Protection Act was passed to allow for temporary and permanent sites to collect organics for composting.

2010

Mercury Thermostat Collection Legislation requires manufacturers to collect and properly dispose of thermostats containing mercury. Before this legislation, the Illinois EPA estimated that somewhere between 88,000 and 132,000 mercury thermostats are disposed of annually in Illinois, with only about five percent collected for recycling.

2011



Jen Walling becomes executive director.

2013

Hydraulic Fracturing Regulatory Act passed.

Illinois adopts the strictest fracking regulations in the nation. The legislation forces oil and gas companies to register with the Department of Natural Resources, undergo a complex permitting process, and uphold strong environmental standards.

2015

The Mahomet Aquifer is designated a sole source aquifer by the EPA.

The Environmental Protection Act is amended to prohibit hazardous waste from being stored in landfills whose runoff flows into the aquifer, which provides clean drinking water to nearly one million people across Central Illinois.

2016

Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) passed.

FEJA authorized $30 million to develop and establish three clean energy-related job training programs for Illinois citizens over the next 12 years to support the additional workforce needed to reach these goals. FEJA requires these programs to be implemented by ComEd through their Workforce Development Implementation Plan. The $30M will be allocated in three $10 million increments which will be paid in the delivery years of 2017, 2021, and 2025, spread across 3 different programs: Solar Training Pipeline, Solar Craft Apprenticeship Program, Multi-cultural Jobs Program.

2017

Preventing Lead in Drinking Water bill approved.

The Illinois General Assembly approved the Preventing Lead in Drinking Water bill. IEC has worked hard to pass legislation to protect children from lead poisoning. Illinois ranks higher than the national average for childhood lead exposure, which leads to lifelong intellectual, emotional and behavioral consequences.

2018

Illinois Water Justice Coalition founded.

The Water Justice Coalition brought together environmental organizations, community groups, labor unions, and public health advocates to focus on interconnected issues including lead service line replacement, water affordability programs, PFAS contamination standards, and stronger drinking water protections. “Illinois now has the most protective groundwater quality standards for PFAS in the country,” says James Jennings, director of Illinois EPA, at IEC’s 2025 annual meeting in December. “The state dispersed more water infrastructure funding in 2024 than any state except California.”

IEC partners with League of Conservation Voters (LCV)

The Illinois Environmental Council and the League of Conservation Voters launched a partnership in 2018 aimed at strengthening environmental advocacy across the state. The collaboration focuses on holding elected officials accountable for their environmental record, elevating conservation issues during election cycles, and reshaping the political landscape around environmental policy in Illinois.

“The Illinois Environmental Council has been working to protect Illinois’ environment in our state capitol since 1975. Partnering with the League of Conservation Voters, and the larger Conservation Voter Movement, will help the environmental community in Illinois increase our power to seek positive environmental change,” said Illinois Environmental Council Executive Director Jen Walling.

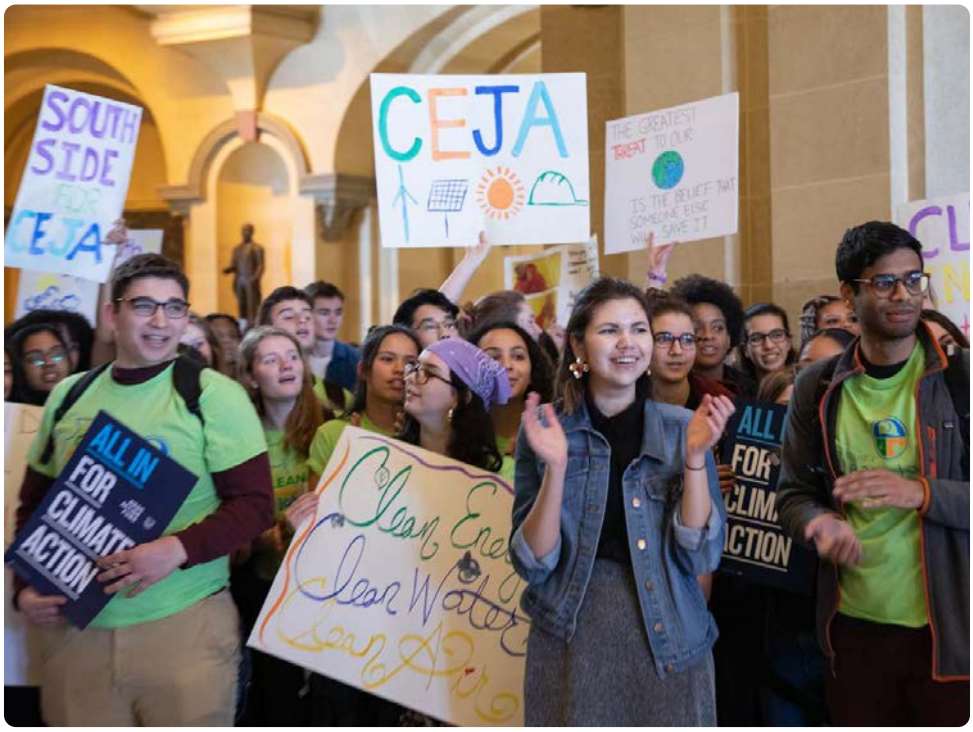
2020

COVID-19 pandemic forced innovation. Virtual Lobbying, Virtual Meetings, and Lunch and Learn online series were introduced.

> **"THE QUICK TRANSITION TO VIRTUAL LOBBYING AND MEETINGS DURING THE PANDEMIC WAS REALLY EFFECTIVE. IT MADE THE COALITION STRONGER AND MORE INCLUSIVE. IT MADE IT EASIER FOR GROUPS FROM ALL OVER THE STATE TO PARTICIPATE."**
>
> **—Anne McKibbin**

Virtual meetings became a permanent tool in IEC's coalition-building work, expanding who could participate.

2021



Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) passed. Governor JB Pritzker signed into law the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act– an historic, nation-leading clean energy legislation that centers communities most impacted by the climate crisis. The Illinois' landmark law includes targeting 100% clean energy by 2050 and transitioning away from fossil fuels by 2045.

2021

Illinois Lead Service Line Replacement and Notification Act passed.

Illinois Lead Service Line Replacement and Notification Act passed, making Illinois the third state in the nation to require full replacement of lead drinking water pipes, which can deliver toxic lead in each glass of water. Effective Jan. 1, 2022, it mandated that all water utilities in Illinois identify, notify customers, and fully replace lead service lines, becoming the first state-level mandate outside Michigan to do so. It bans partial replacements, requires inventory completion, and sets deadlines for replacement. The bill signing creates a path for resources from federal infrastructure legislation that could require lead pipe replacements across the nation. Illinois has more lead pipes than any other state in the nation, with at least 686,000 connecting homes to water mains.

2023

Chicago Department of Environment re-established.

2025



IEC celebrates 50th anniversary

2025

PFAS phase-out legislation signed.

After years of advocacy, Illinois will phase out the use of PFAS (“forever chemicals”) in many everyday products and firefighting gear, a major step forward for public health and environmental protection (HB2516 and HB2409). Gov. Pritzker signed HB 2516 in August 2025, banning intentional PFAS (“forever chemicals”) in products like cosmetics, dental floss, and menstrual products by Jan 1, 2032.

The Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act, or CRGA, passes in Illinois.

Illinois legislators passed a major energy bill that creates grid-battery and geothermal incentives and a virtual-power-plant program. Calls for the procurement of 3 gigawatts of energy storage by 2030.

Northern Illinois Transit Authority Act (NITA) signed

Governor Pritzker signed the Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA) Act on December 16, 2025. Starting June 1, 2026, NITA will replace the RTA as the governing body for public transportation in Northeastern Illinois.

The new law provides $1.5 billion in stable annual funding for the CTA, Metra, and Pace. This money will prevent service cuts, enhance safety, and create unified fare and service planning across all three transit agencies.

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IEC 50th Anniversary Honorary Committee

Our 50th Anniversary Honorary Committee is a group of current and former board members, staff, donors, lawmakers, and environmentalists we've worked alongside over the past fifty years. Thank you to our Honorary Committee members for your continued support and your ongoing dedication to IEC's mission.

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Marc Celani
Peter Chung
Victoria Coleman
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Rick Courtheoux
Donnie Dann
Jack Darin
Tony Dean
Neda Deylami
Leader Robyn Gabel
John Gay
Delmar Gillus
Jonathan Goldman
Vittorio M. Gomez
Susan Harney
Rep. Elizabeth Hernandez

IEC 50th Anniversary Honorary Committee, Continued

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Rob Kelter
Will Kenworthy
Chris Kessler
David Kolata
Angela Larsen
Belinda Li
Karen Magid
Ashley Maybanks
David McEllis
Melanie Moore
Sarah Moskowitz
Hon. Elaine Nekritz
Nife Olufosoye
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Cynthia Segura
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Mere Montgomery,
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Keegan Sullivan,
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Maxine Touchette,
Communications Associate

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Meredith Lukow,
Director of Grants Management

Angie Mizeur,
Chief Operations Officer

Mundra Turtogtokh,
Development Associate

Aly West,
Office Manager

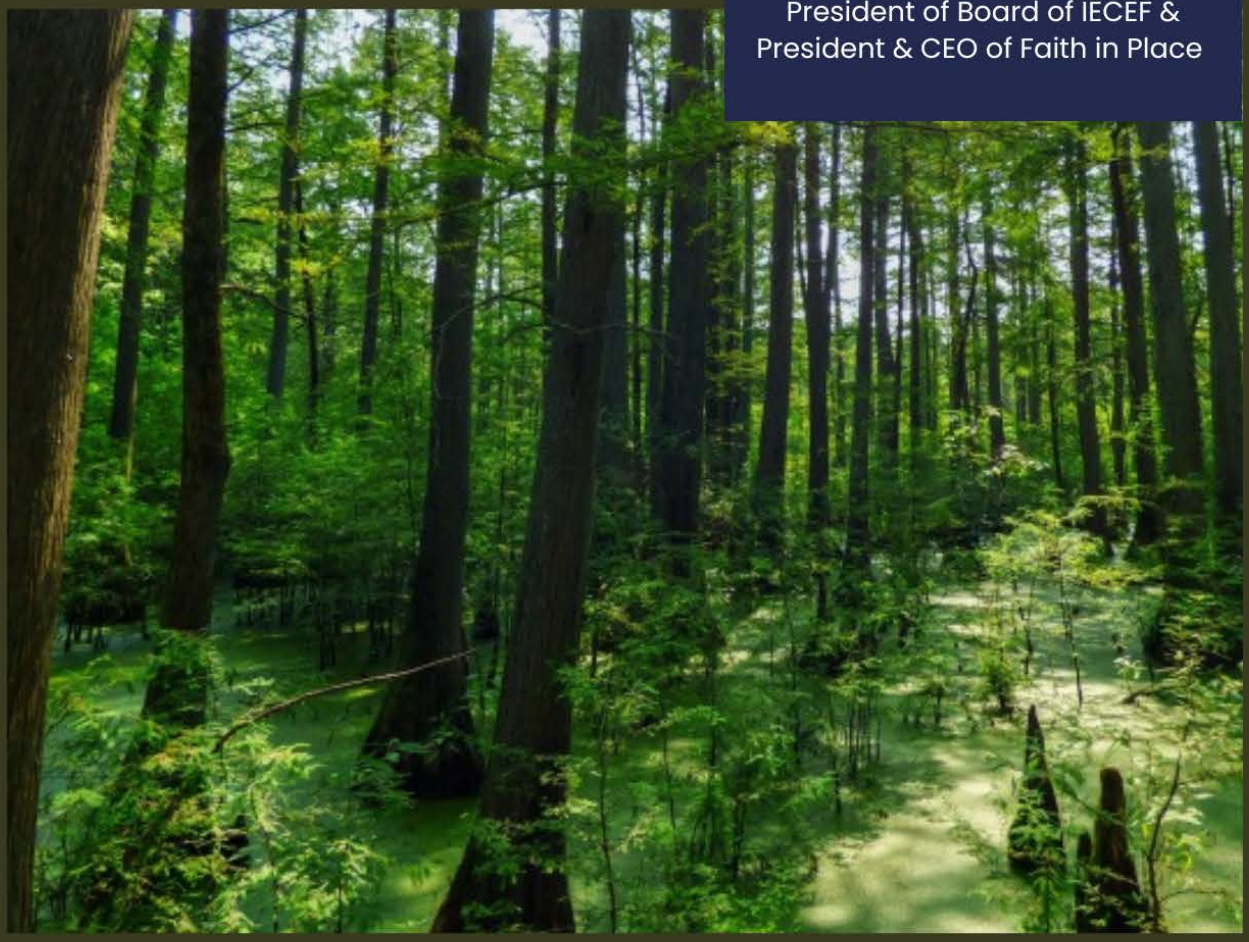
CELEBRATING
50 YEARS OF IMPACT

"Faith in Place is grateful to celebrate 50 years of the Illinois Environmental Council uniting partners to turn vision into action. May tonight remind us of the power we share to protect our common home and advance justice in every community."



REV. BRIAN J. SAUDER

President of Board of IECEF &
President & CEO of Faith in Place



Thanks to all my amazing legislative colleagues, for their unending support of the Illinois Environmental Council over many years.











With love to you all,
Karen

Congratulations Hon. Elaine Nekritz on receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award!





From one tree hugger to another

I am so proud of my Senator, Julie Morrison, for her well-deserved Milestone Achievement Award!

The legislation she sponsored along with Rep. Abdelnasser Rashid, phases out toxic "forever chemicals" that endanger public health. Bravo and thank you!



From Karen May, Chair of the first House Environmental Health Committee

Congratulations

to tonight's award winners and to IEC for 50 years of environmental leadership!

Special Shoutout to Hon. Elaine Nekritz!



REPRESENTATIVE

BOB RITA



Happy 50th, IEC!
Congratulations to my colleague and good friend, Leader Julie Morrison!

SENATOR DON HARMON

SENATE PRESIDENT

6941 W. NORTH AVENUE, OAK PARK
(708) 848-2002 HARMON@SENATEDEM.ILLINOIS.GOV

One future.
Together, we find a way.

Since 1951, The Nature Conservancy has protected and preserved nature. Now, faced with the interconnected crises of climate change and species loss, we have years, not decades, to scale up local conservation work to a global level and create a future with a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature.

nature.org/illinois

Image Credit:
Mark Archibald/TNC
Photo Contest 2021



The Nature Conservancy

Democratic Party of Illinois

ILLINOIS DEMOCRATS

are building a clean energy future

VOLUNTEER TO JOIN THE FIGHT



DPI CHAIR LISA HERNANDEZ

Paid for by the Democratic Party of Illinois, www.ildems.com.
Not authorized by any candidate or candidate's committee.

RESPIRATORY HEALTH ASSOCIATION®

We've both come a long way since 1975.

We were proud to be an IEC sponsor then, and we are even prouder today!

Congratulations IEC on 50 years of fighting and winning with us on clean air and a healthy environment for all!

Less pollution and cleaner air means less lung disease and a better quality of life for everyone in Illinois.

Here's to the next 50 years and getting our state to the healthy zero-emissions future it deserves.



Clean power + Clean buildings + Clean transportation + Clean lungs

IEC
ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

Congratulations to the **Illinois Environmental Council**

on **50 years** of environmental leadership!



Senator Sara Feigenholtz
is proud to support the IEC
and advocate alongside you.



CONGRATULATIONS TO THE IEC ON 50 YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL VICTORIES THAT ENSURE A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT ACROSS ILLINOIS

State Representative
Robyn Gabel
Illinois 18TH DISTRICT







Investing in the Communities We Serve.

Proud to support the future of clean energy with the upcoming 342 MW Eldorado Solar Project—an innovative agrivoltaics initiative coming to Saline County, Illinois.

From workforce development to agriculture and education, renewable energy is powering a brighter, more resilient Illinois.

Learn more

THANK YOU IEC
FOR YOUR LEADERSHIP
and to our awardees for their longstanding environmental leadership!

CAMERON DAVIS
COMMISSIONER
Metropolitan Water Reclamation District
CAMDAVIS.ORG

VOTE JOSINA
COOK COUNTY BOARD, 13TH DISTRICT

We Love IEC!





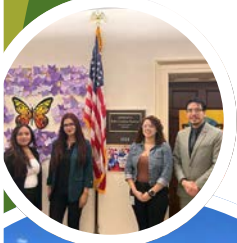
IL-09
DANIEL BISS
FOR CONGRESS

JOIN THE FIGHT
DANIELBISS.COM

With gratitude to the Illinois Environmental Council, Thank you for advancing clean air and water, environmental justice, and climate-smart jobs across Illinois. I am so proud to stand with you.

GREENLATINOS ILLINOIS
Luchando por la Liberación Ambiental

SOMOS GREENLATINOS



Uniting Latino/a/e voices to fight for environmental liberation.



BECOME A MEMBER TODAY:

- Free options available
- Advocacy & event opportunities
- Grant funding access

CONTACT:
lucyconteras@greenlatinos.org

EQUALITY ILLINOIS
congratulates
IEC
ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL
on 50 years of leadership! Thank you for fighting for environmental protections, justice, and access to ensure a world where everyone belongs and can thrive!

Equality Illinois is dedicated to building a better Illinois by advancing equality and full acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community. Learn more and support our mission at www.eqil.org

Lindsey LaPointe
19TH District Illinois State Representative



Fighting for a greener, cleaner Illinois – Rep. LaPointe and the 19th District Enviro Council

IEC50
GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY, EVERGREEN MISSION

Congratulations to all the honorees!

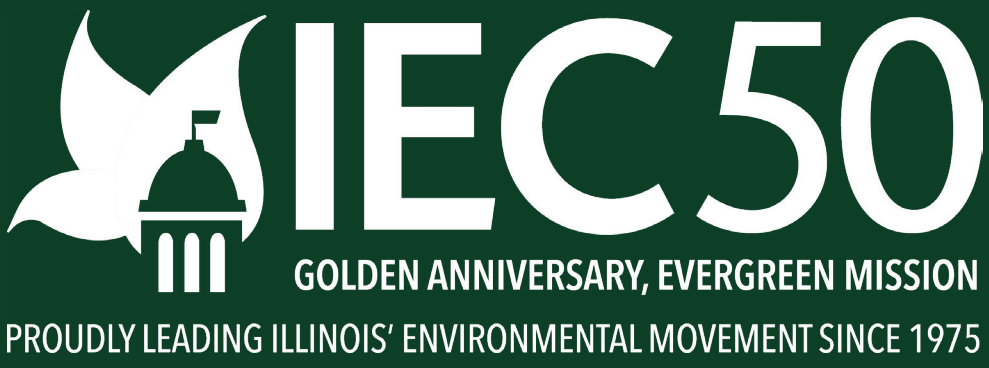


MIKE KELLY
STATE REPRESENTATIVE | ILLINOIS 15TH DISTRICT
DISTRICT@REPKELLY.COM 773-736-0218



Proud to stand with environmental leaders and advocates working to protect our climate. As Comptroller, I'll continue to support sustainability and ensure a healthier future for Illinois.

Margaret CROKE
Democrat for IL State Comptroller
Paid for by Croke for Illinois



Since 1975, the Illinois Environmental Council has worked to safeguard Illinois — its people, its plants and animals, and the natural systems on which all life depends by building power for people and the environment.

www.ilenviro.org | Phone: 217-544-5954 | Fax: 217-544-5958 | iec@ilenviro.org

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