

Cleanup Organization Works The Missouri River

BY HEATHER ERVIN

Since its founding in 2001, Missouri River Relief (MoRR) has taken 17,906 people on 104 cleanups to remove more than 718 tons of trash from 863 miles along the Missouri River from St. Louis to Yankton, S.D.

The grassroots, not-for-profit organization got its start after founder Jim Karpowicz saw a short film about Chad Pregracke, founder of Living Lands and Waters (LL&W), and his river cleanup efforts on the Mississippi River. Karpowicz contacted Pregracke and asked for his help to clean a local reach of the Missouri River, and the first cleanup event was held in late 2001.

The cleanup brought 300 people to the river to remove 30 tons of trash and was so successful that the local committee decided to form MoRR. To show its appreciation, the organization has helped LL&W by providing crews and equipment when needed. "LL&W was the original inspiration that started MoRR, and we've worked together ever since," said Steve Schnarr, MoRR program manager.

Since its first event, MoRR has been dedicated to connecting people to the Missouri River through hands-on river cleanups, educational events and activities. MoRR hosts six big community cleanups with up to 300 volunteers each, and many small cleanups with 10 to 20 volunteers. In addition to hosting cleanups, the organization par-



Cleanup crew with some of the trash collected from the Missouri River banks.

ticipates in 31 Missouri River festivals that bring together corporate, scientific, agency and non-profit experts to teach 14,700 students about Missouri River issues.

Jeff Barrow, MoRR program director, said the organization finds plenty of trash during each cleanup. "We find practically everything that is made by industrial society," said Barrow. "The largest number of items we find is plastic bottles, and the

largest things we find are abandoned vehicles." Barrow said he even found an upright piano once.

Big Muddy River Sweep

In 2011, MoRR became an active member of the navigation industry when it celebrated its 10th anniversary by chartering two barges and a towboat. With a greater on-the-river presence, MoRR was able to host the Big Muddy River

Sweep, a two-month campaign of community cleanups across the state of Missouri in Kansas City, Jefferson City, Hermann, Washington, St. Charles, Cooper's Landing and at the mouth of the Missouri River.

"Our crews also conducted numerous small-scale cleanups as the garbage barge moved downriver," said Barrow.

MoRR had 1,473 volunteers on the waterway to remove 60 tons of trash from the Missouri River during the sweep. Items pulled from the river included 493 tires, 21 refrigerators and freezers, and five messages in bottles.

"I know everyone who helps on these river cleanups is really proud of how much garbage we can remove from our river environment," said Schnarr. "I think the thing I am the most proud of is how many people, especially kids, we have had on the river for the first time." Schnarr said he believes spending time on the river has the potential to change the way people see their environment, themselves and the water resources they depend upon.

Drought Conditions

The past two years have been uniquely challenging in the Missouri River basin with record-breaking floods followed by record-breaking heat and drought. Barrow said that recently the river has become too low for the group's boats, and that the ramps they require are high and dry.

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Volunteers load trash onto “garbage barge” during recent cleanup at Hartsburg, Mo.

Cleanup

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“We winterize our boats and generally do not use them very much in the winter, but the low conditions could curtail our on-the-river activities if the situation continues,” he said.

Schnarr said the low river levels have revealed a lot of old debris and trash, from wrecked cars to tires. In December 2012, Schnarr said a group of citizens in Hermann, Mo., were walking along a dry portion of the river bed when they noticed dozens of tires embedded in the sand. “In just two days, we got the word out and 16 volunteers showed up on a cold, blustery Saturday afternoon to remove 84 tires out of that one exposed sand bar,” said Schnarr.

Despite low water levels, Schnarr and Barrow are both optimistic about the 2013 season. MoRR plans to hire an education coordinator and expand the on-the-river education program.

“We plan to conduct six major cleanups on the main stem of the Missouri River,” Barrow said. “We will also provide safety boats and crews for paddling races, including the world’s longest continuous paddle race—the MR340 from Kansas City to St. Charles, Mo.”

Support From Barge Industry

Several marine industry organizations sponsor MoRR and provide the group with equipment and financial support.

“The community of people and businesses that use the Missouri River is so much smaller than the Mississippi,” said Schnarr. “Although there is a lot of political contention on the river, we have found that the people who use the river all want to pitch in and help clean it up.”

AEP River Operations donated two 15-passenger vans and a 3/4-ton, four-wheel-drive pickup truck to MoRR in addition to making annual contributions as a financial sponsor. Companies such as Hermann Sand & Gravel and the Jefferson City River Terminal helped tow barges upstream in 2011 for free. Barges were provided at no cost to MoRR for cleanups in 2011 thanks to the Army Corps of Engineers and Gateway Dredging & Contracting. Humboldt Marine also helped offload trash for the Big Muddy River Sweep in 2011.

“The thing I enjoy most about this work is the time I get to spend on the river with river people,” said Schnarr. “We are really proud of the support we have received from the river industry.”