

NINA MOINI: At the edge of Fargo, North Dakota, a metal archway hangs over a walking path. It depicts silhouetted figures passing sandbags and piling them next to a firefighter. This monument is titled The Spirit of the Sandbagger, a tribute to community responses to major floods in the past.

Off to its side is a bridge that goes from Fargo to Moorhead, Minnesota over the Red River. The two communities are linked by the river and its risk of flooding. Recently, the Minnesota Legislature approved \$10 million for flood mitigation infrastructure, and the area will soon have a massive diversion project built to send floodwaters away from the two cities. But flooding aside, a local group is working to connect people with the river in other ways.

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Riverkeeper started in 1990, when a group of citizens got together and decided we wanted to unite the two communities instead divide them with the Red River. And so we provide opportunities for the community to learn about the Red River, help sustain it, and safely enjoy it.

NINA MOINI: Christine Holland is CEO of the Fargo-Moorhead-based group Riverkeepers. Recently, she helped *Minnesota Now* learn more about the Red River from the water. We climbed into kayaks and paddled out from under the bridge.

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Yeah. Going that way, I need to go this way. So the river does flow north. It's not the only river that flows north, there are others. But that does create some ice jams in the spring with the flooding, so that's one issue. But it is, like, 500 miles. There's eight dams on the river in the United States. It's a great fishery. It's one of the best catfisheries in the United States, so people come from all over the United States to fish for catfish in the Red River.

NINA MOINI: And other fish, too, right? I feel like I was reading up on walleye. So other stuff people can fish, too.

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: There's over 70 species of fish in the Red River, and in the spring, one of our-- we call them our fishing friends-- just caught a 28-and-1/2-inch walleye on the River.

NINA MOINI: Whoa!

[LAUGHTER]

Hope we don't run into one that big around here.

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: And Minnesota DNR has also been stocking lake sturgeon in the river. So that's one of the fish that was historically in the river that wasn't in it recently. And those can get really big. They're like prehistoric little dinosaur fish is what they look like, and then they can get to be like 18 feet.

NINA MOINI: Wow. Tell our listeners a little bit-- just because they can't feel this beautiful breeze and see how green everything is and how beautiful it is. What is your experience like of this river, being around it so much, like, how do you take it all in?

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: We don't actually operate our canoe and kayak rentals until the river has a slower current, and those are-- you can find on Minnesota DNR website. You should be on it if you're a beginner, intermediate, or advanced level. So that's one thing. We want people to be out here when it's safe and they're comfortable because then they're going to have a good experience. Like, you're here enjoying these beautiful birds, right? It's awesome.

Once people get on here, and usually with a group, they feel more comfortable. They realize the current's not as strong as they've been told their entire life. It can be, of course, when it's flooding, but not when we're trying to do it safely. It'll be the right current.

And it's just much more beautiful than they think. We're in the middle of downtown Fargo-Moorhead right now, and you can hear birds. You can hear a little bit of traffic, but not too much. Yeah, they always think it's way more beautiful than they thought it was going to be.

NINA MOINI: I feel like rivers are so critical to just our ecosystems and our state, and I feel like people don't know enough about them. What do you think?

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Yeah, that's exactly why Riverkeepers is here, because there's lots of myths about the Red River. Like, it's very dirty, which is not true. It's muddy, so that's why it looks like chocolate milk.

And also that there's undertows, and there are not undertows in the Red River anymore. Now that the dams have been retrofitted with a 5% rock slopeway, there are no undertows in the river because it only drops 6 inches per mile. So geologically, there are no more undertows in the river.

NINA MOINI: Let's talk about flooding and just kind get that one out of the way, and then we can talk about all the wonderful things, obviously, too, about the river, but what are you hoping people will keep in mind when it comes to just the flooding situation in and around the Red River?

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Yeah, so that's one of the things actually rivers naturally do, is flood, and it's good for the ecosystem. And so we-- Riverkeepers tries to just teach people where we should develop, and where we should build houses and other structures, rather than trying to confine the river.

NINA MOINI: How do you engage with people to get them out here to experience the river, but also learn about it, and also feel civically engaged and feel a sense of responsibility for it and maintaining it?

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Yeah, so those three pillars. Whenever we can use more of-- than one, it's a successful project for us. So we try to meet the community where their needs are.

Our target market is 2 to 92, and if they like environmental stuff, we want them to come out and plant trees with us and help preserve the ecosystem around the river, and then maybe they'll see somebody kayaking and be like, oh, maybe I can go kayaking. Or if we're kayaking and you're enjoying these gorgeous trees out here today, and then you'll maybe want to come out and help plant them in the future as well. So I'm just trying to take people from one step to the next.

We did a tree-planting in Moorhead, and there was a three-year-old with his uncle and his mom down there, and the next day he got up and wanted to come plant trees again. Like, how awesome is that? So it's the people that are starting to enjoy and appreciate the river, and it's starting to really be used more than it used to be.

NINA MOINI: What do you say to folks who-- and you've touched on just people often have a different perception of what it takes to get out here, what is it going to be like. What do you say to people who have never really thought to come and enjoy the river?

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Yeah, we just invite them to come with us. Just getting everybody out into a kayak, we can tip the kayak a little bit so how much leeway you actually have. And then fishing along the river is also a really great recreation opportunity to do multi-generational. We did a virtual fishing tournament last year, and one mom sent me a bunch of pictures and was just like, this was the perfect excuse for us to go out as a family.

NINA MOINI: I wonder, when you think about the future of the Red River, what is it going to take to make sure it's thriving in 20, 50, maybe even 100 years?

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: It's the community that will have to help take care of it and help build up the trees along the river, the access along the river. It would be great to have more restaurants and bathrooms and water fountains and all of the things. The city of Moorhead has a recreation corridor plan that they've been using, and actually, it hasn't been collecting dust, so that's been awesome. Last year we put up 17 interpretive signs along the walk. And so just for people to learn about the river helps a lot.

NINA MOINI: This is so fun, Christine, thank you.

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Well, thank you.

NINA MOINI: What a nice experience.

CHRISTINE HOLLAND: Are you sure you want to go back?

NINA MOINI: I really don't, but we gotta hit the road, we got more places to visit.

That really was lovely. Our thanks to Christine Holland, who's CEO of Riverkeepers in Fargo-Moorhead. We had a great time talking to people in the area during a recent show we did in Moorhead. If you missed those conversations, you can find them at mprnews.org/minnesotanow.