

# Rising to the Freshwater Challenge: Catalysing River Restoration Worldwide



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SYMPOSIUM SATELLITE EVENT #5  
KEY MESSAGES

## The International River Foundation

For over twenty years, the International River Foundation (IRF) has championed river resilience to create a legacy of healthy rivers that benefit ecosystems, communities and economies. Through the platform of people, ideas and impact, the IRF collaborates with global partners to help drive river restoration projects worldwide and accelerate action towards resilient rivers for future generations. We are the world's voice for rivers

## The Freshwater Challenge

Rivers, lakes and other wetlands are on the frontlines of the climate and nature crises.

The important role of healthy freshwater ecosystems has been recognised in key international agreements and agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD),

the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. However, current international approaches to water are not helping countries achieve the targets set out in these global frameworks fast enough.

In response to this challenge, the Freshwater Challenge

(FWC) is a voluntary, country-led partnership with the goal to restore 300,000 kilometres of degraded rivers and 350 million hectares of degraded wetlands by 2030, while securing the protection of freshwater ecosystems important for biodiversity and ecosystem services. 54 countries and the European Union have joined the Freshwater Challenge so far.

## Symposium Satellite Event #5

Kicking off the 2026 Symposium Satellite Event Series in the lead up to the 27th International River Symposium, this Event spotlighted the progress, partnerships and ambition behind the world's largest initiative to restore rivers and wetlands by 2030: the Freshwater Challenge.

Through uniting government leaders, delivery partners and business champions, we shared what's working, what's accelerating change, and where the biggest opportunities lie.

The key message? Let us champion and accelerate collective action to protect and restore rivers, wetlands, and freshwater ecosystems as vital foundations for climate resilience, biodiversity, livelihoods, and economic prosperity. Governments, communities, businesses, youth, and global partners must work together to turn commitments into scaled, long-term action on the ground.

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# SYMPOSIUM SATELLITE EVENT #5 KEY MESSAGES



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## 1. Freshwater ecosystems are central to addressing the global climate and biodiversity crisis

Rivers, wetlands, and lakes are among the ecosystems most impacted by climate change, biodiversity loss, droughts, floods, and land degradation. Case studies from Kazakhstan, Liberia, and Iraq reinforced that protecting and restoring freshwater systems is essential not only for environmental sustainability, but also for economic resilience, livelihoods, food security, and human well-being.

Panellists from the Convention on Wetlands, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) further emphasised that rivers, wetlands, and lakes are on the frontline of climate impacts and biodiversity loss, and must be central to resilience and adaptation strategies worldwide.

## 2. Protecting wetlands and rivers is both an environmental and economic imperative

Healthy freshwater ecosystems provide critical services that support agriculture, fisheries, tourism, climate regulation, disaster resilience, biodiversity, and community wellbeing. Speakers highlighted that investment in river and wetland restoration should be viewed as a strategic economic investment that underpins long-term prosperity, resilience, and sustainable development.

## 3. The Freshwater Challenge is building a strong global movement for the restoration and protection of rivers and wetlands

No single country or organisation can solve the freshwater crisis alone - the Freshwater Challenge is about collective action at scale, and everyone has a role to play. Now involving more than 50 countries, the Freshwater Challenge is elevating freshwater ecosystems onto the global climate, biodiversity, and development agenda through coordinated international action. The experiences shared by Kazakhstan, Liberia, and Iraq demonstrate how global commitments are being translated into practical national implementation and restoration initiatives.

## 4. Landscape-scale and basin-scale approaches are essential for restoring freshwater ecosystems

Restoring freshwater ecosystems requires looking beyond individual sites to the broader river basin and landscape systems that influence them. Healthy rivers and wetlands depend on connected catchments, upstream and downstream flows, surrounding land use, and integrated management across sectors and communities. Kazakhstan's restoration work in the Axwat Lake system reinforced the importance of managing entire hydrological and ecological systems rather than isolated sites.

## 5. Freshwater resilience depends on whole-of-government and whole-of-society collaboration

Governments, communities, youth, Indigenous peoples, businesses, NGOs, and development institutions all have critical roles in delivering long-term freshwater outcomes. Scaling restoration efforts will require coordinated governance, stronger partnerships, and increased mobilisation of public, private, and blended finance.

## 6. Innovative financing, natural capital accounting, and private sector engagement are critical to scaling restoration efforts

The global financing gap for freshwater restoration remains significant. Strengthening partnerships and financing mechanisms will be essential to move from pilots to landscape-scale impact. There is a need to move beyond traditional funding models towards bankable, landscape-scale investments supported by natural capital accounting, business stewardship, corporate partnerships, and stronger economic valuation of freshwater ecosystems. ADB emphasised that the role of business stewardship and corporate partnerships is critical.

## 7. Climate adaptation and national development planning must explicitly include freshwater ecosystems

Rivers and wetlands need to be much more visible within climate adaptation, biodiversity, and national development frameworks and planning processes. Liberia highlighted the integration of freshwater ecosystem protection into national adaptation planning and NDCs, while Iraq strengthening long-term water and marshland strategies in response to climate pressures.

## 8. Youth leadership and community engagement are essential for sustaining momentum and long-term freshwater action

IUCN highlighted the growing contribution of youth leadership, citizen science, mentoring, and advocacy in advancing the Freshwater Challenge globally. Iraq and Liberia similarly reinforced the importance of empowering communities, protecting traditional knowledge and livelihoods, and engaging future generations in freshwater stewardship and restoration.

