

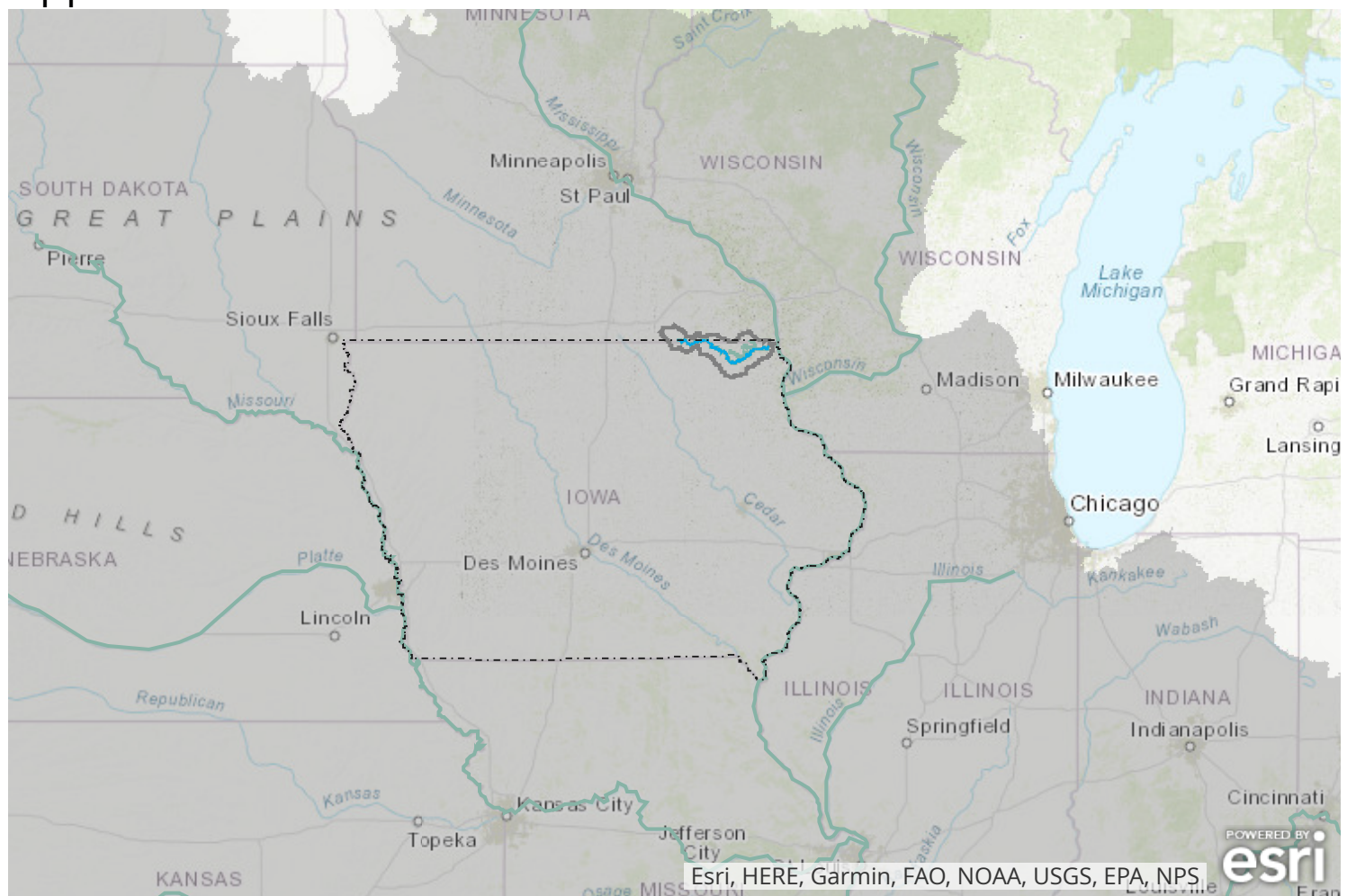
Upper Iowa Watershed at a Glance

*This story was made with [Esri's Story Map Journal](#).
Read the interactive version on the web at <https://arcg.is/0y54T8>.*



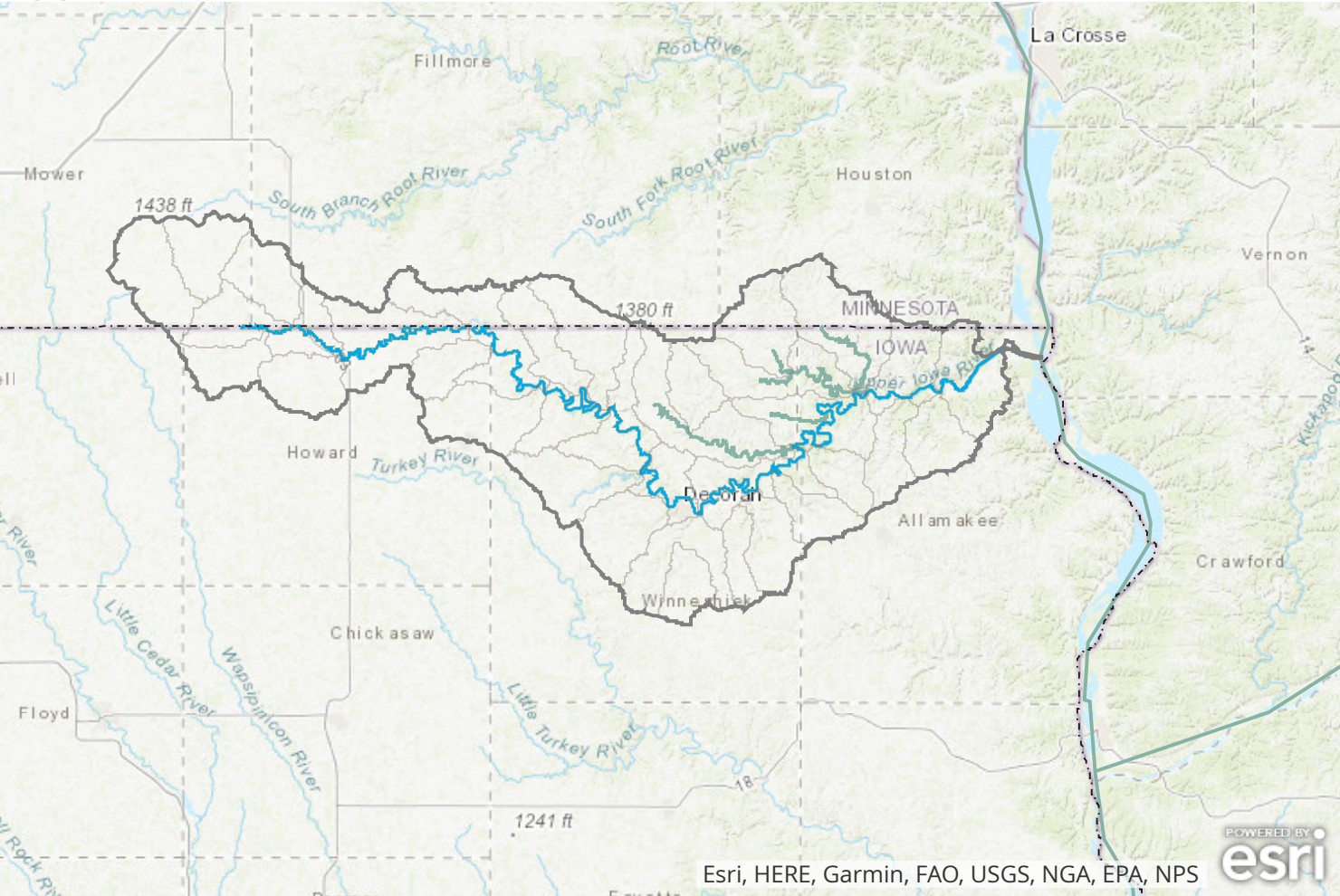
The Mississippi River Basin is the largest watershed in North America and the 4th largest watershed in the world at over 1,245,000 square miles. It includes major tributaries such as the Missouri, Ohio, and Arkansas Rivers and thousands of smaller tributaries along its 2,300 mile course.

Upper Iowa River



The Upper Iowa River is one of the many smaller tributaries to the Upper Mississippi River. The 150-mile tributary is located in the Driftless Area of Northeast Iowa. The majority of the residents living in the Upper Iowa River Watershed have some connection to the land and its waters through agricultural production, natural resource based recreation and/or some component of the tourism industry. The watershed boasts small to medium sized bucolic farms, many of which include dairy, beef or local food production, and land use in the watershed includes higher percentages of forest and pasture than most other large watersheds in Iowa. The small villages rely heavily on tourism, which is dependent on the river, cold water trout streams, numerous waterfalls, public hardwood forests, historic sites, scenic byways, and land and water trails.

Upper Iowa River Watershed



The Upper Iowa River Watershed (UIRW) encompasses a 1,001 square mile (640,901 acre) area of extreme Northeast Iowa and Southeast Minnesota with approximately 78% of the UIRW spanning portions of four counties (Allamakee, Winneshiek, Howard, and Mitchell) in Northeast Iowa and 21% of the upper portions of the watershed encompassing portions of three Southeast Minnesota counties (Houston, Fillmore, and Mower).

County	Acres	% of UIRW	% County in UIRW
Winneshiek, Iowa	279,662	43.6	63.5
Allamakee, Iowa	130,838	20.4	30.7
Howard, Iowa	90,360	14.1	29.8
Fillmore, Minnesota	59,228	9.2	10.8
Mower, Minnesota	51,061	8	11.1
Houston, Minnesota	28,800	4.5	7.9
Mitchell, Iowa	953	0.1	0.32

History



Originally known as the Oneota River, the Upper Iowa River was settled by European settlers in the mid-19th century. Original settlers found a landscape rich with game and indigenous peoples living in the wooded valleys and surrounding tallgrass prairie. Settlement brought big changes to the land.

Photo courtesy of Jenna Larson

Early Settlement



European settlement transformed the Upper Iowa River Watershed. The land transitioned from prairie and woodland to agricultural fields and pasture. Settlements sprung up on terraces close to rivers and streams but safely out of the floodplain. Coldwater springs and streams provided drinking water and plentiful trout were a delicacy to settling families.

Photo courtesy of NRCS

Transformation



By the early 1900s, as more and more land was turned over to the plow, watershed dynamics changed too. Deeply plowed fields on steep slopes caused horrific erosion and deep gullies to form. Rivers and streams muddied with sediment and became devoid of trout. Increases in runoff caused severe flooding and damage to public and private infrastructure and farms. It was clear to those living in the Upper Iowa River Watershed that a change was necessary to carry on their way of life.

Photo courtesy *Historical Agriculture and Soil Erosion in the Upper Mississippi Valley*

A New Era



The formation of the United States Department of Agriculture's Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service or NRCS) in 1935 began a new chapter in land use methods in Northeast Iowa and the surrounding region. Local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) began providing local leadership and partnership in 1937. With the help of NRCS and the SWCDs, farmers in the Upper Iowa River Watershed implemented soil conservation practices such as contour farming, terraces, grassed waterways, and diverse crop rotations. Although the land transitioned to new generations of farmers through time, the land ethic of Northeast Iowa farmers was deeply instilled and continues with many today.

Photo Courtesy of NRCS