



Mass Rivers shapes water infrastructure bill

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance and several partner organizations have been hard at work to ensure the inclusion of river-friendly provisions in the water infrastructure bill currently making its way through the State House. We especially appreciate the leadership of Senator Jamie Eldridge and Senate President Theresa Murray – their bill passed the Senate in February. Next, it's on to the House! For more details, read on...

WATER INFRASTRUCTURE AFFECTS RIVERS. We know it's not at the top of anyone's list of cocktail party conversation topics, but water infrastructure really matters to rivers. The way we treat, transport, and dispose of water greatly affects the health of our rivers and coastal waters, and their ability to provide habitat and recreation. Inadequately treated sewage, combined sewer overflows, failing septic systems, and polluted stormwater degrade water quality all over the state. Leaky pipes lead to wasted water, leaving streams drier than they should be. So if you care about rivers and streams, you have a stake in the condition of the



Constructed wetland at Alewife Brook. Photo by Catherine Woodbury.

Commonwealth's water infrastructure. Unfortunately, our water infrastructure's in tough shape. In 2011, Senator Jamie Eldridge and Representative Carolyn Dykema's Water Infrastructure Financing Commission identified a gaping \$39 billion chasm between available funding and statewide municipal water infrastructure needs over the next 20 years. Fixing miles of underground pipes and complicated treatment plants is very expensive.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO "GREEN" OUR WATER INFRASTRUCTURE. The water infrastructure bill currently moving through the State House is providing an opportunity for us to urge the

state to go beyond repairing traditional water infrastructure to increase investment in green infrastructure. Green infrastructure generally uses nature to clean and transport water, control flooding, and increase water recharge to aquifers. In some cases, the technique is less "natural," but restores the natural hydrology of the area. Examples include constructed wetlands, porous pavement, rain gardens, and decentralized wastewater treatment. Green infrastructure provides public health, environmental, aesthetic, and recreational benefits to communities, and can also save them money. One

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Hope for dry streams?

One-fifth of Massachusetts streams suffer from unnaturally low flows, and sometimes even run dry during the summer due to excessive water withdrawals. This is because the underground water that supplies our water needs also provides water for streams. So when we use too much water – especially during the summer – we deprive streams of the water they need to support fish and other wildlife, and we can't enjoy our rivers for fishing, canoeing, or kayaking. Similarly, if our water supply comes from a reservoir, the reservoir manager must release enough water, at the right times, to

maintain healthy river habitats downstream. When we use too much water (again, usually during the summer), there isn't enough left for the rivers downstream.

WHAT IS THE STATE DOING ABOUT IT? As we've written about here, Massachusetts' environmental agencies have been working with a large group of stakeholders since early 2010 on the "Sustainable Water Management Initiative" (SWMI) to better manage the way the state allows towns (and other large water users) to use water. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) is now readying the proposed new rules for public comment.

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APRIL, 2014

From the Director

A COSTLY BARGAIN

Water is ridiculously cheap. Rates charged by water suppliers almost always fail to capture the full cost of supplying water to their customers. These costs include delivery and treatment, capital

investments, equipment maintenance, and the cost of remedying environmental impacts. Statewide, this chronic undercharging has led to a multi-billion dollar gap between water infrastructure needs and funding available (see article on p.), resulting in old, leaky, corroded pipes, combined sewer overflows, depleted stream flows and water contamination.

Water suppliers often find it difficult to convince communities to approve rate increases. However, we willingly pay far more for services that (I would argue) are far less important to us than water. Preparing for a recent talk in Newton, I decided to see how annual water costs in that city stack up against other common household expenses for a family of four:

- Water In 2012, a typical 4-person household in Newton paid **\$719 for water** (Massachusetts' range is \$113 - \$1,556; information from Tighe & Bond Water/Sewer rate survey – look online to see how your town compares)
- Coffee to go Two adults, one Dunkin Donuts medium coffee each, five times a week, 50 weeks a year: **\$895 for coffee**
- Wired house Comcast at \$130/month: **\$1,560 for cable TV, landline phone and internet**
- Cell phones Verizon unlimited minutes + 3GB of data for four phones at \$210/month: **\$2,520 for cell phone service**
- Transportation Two cars, each driven 12,000 miles/year, 30 mpg, gas at \$3.44/gal: **\$2,752 for gas**

I could go on, but you get the idea. Water is a bargain – and it shouldn't be. Paying full cost could protect public health and restore our streams and beaches. Please support your local water utility when they seek a rate increase – and feel free to use or share these talking points.

Thank you for your generous support for rivers!

Julia

The Alliance welcomes individual and organizational members:

Belmont Citizens Forum
Berkshire Environmental Action Team
Berkshire Natural Resources Council
Blackstone River Coalition
Charles River Conservancy
Charles River Watershed Association
Charlestown Waterfront Coalition
Clean Water Action
Connecticut River Watershed Council
Conservation Law Foundation
Eel River Watershed Association
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Essex County Greenbelt Association
Friends of the Blue Hills
Friends of the Assabet River NWR
Greater Northfield Watershed Association
Green Decade Newton
Groundwork Lawrence
Hoosic River Revival
Hoosic River Watershed Association
Hop Brook Protection Association
Housatonic Valley Association
Ipswich River Watershed Association
Jones River Watershed Association
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust
Mass Audubon
Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
Massachusetts Watershed Coalition
Merrimack River Watershed Council
Millers River Watershed Council
Mystic River Watershed Association
Nashua River Watershed Association
Neponset River Watershed Association
North and South Rivers Watershed Association
OARS, for the Assabet, Sudbury, & Concord Rivers
Parker River Clean Water Association
Shawsheen River Watershed Association
Sudbury Valley Trustees
Sudbury, Assabet and Concord Wild & Scenic River Stewardship Council
Taunton River Watershed Alliance
Taunton River Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council
The Nature Conservancy
Trout Unlimited, Greater Boston Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Pioneer Valley Chapter
Walden Woods Project
Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee (WSCAC)
Watershed Action Alliance of Southeastern MA
Weir River Watershed Association
Westfield River Watershed Association
Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee
Westport River Watershed Alliance

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The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance has been working with the agencies and our partner organizations since the beginning of this effort to strengthen and improve the proposed new policy.

So far, the changes are a mixed bag. On the positive side, the new permitting rules will for the first time connect water allocations to stream flow. Communities seeking significantly more water will be asked first to look carefully at whether they can increase water conservation by providing water efficient devices, further restricting outdoor water, or changing their rate structures. Next they will be required to offset the environmental impacts of their water use by implementing a variety of actions ranging from increasing the amount of stormwater that is returned to the ground, to improving streamside habitat or removing a dam. In addition, communities with severely depleted streams will be required to minimize the impacts of their withdrawals on stream flow, primarily by decreasing water use. These new requirements should lead to improvements in river health, or should at least prevent things from getting worse, in areas where the new rules will apply.

On the other hand, the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance and its partners feel that there are still many areas in the new policy where the state hasn't gotten it right yet. First, the new regulations fail to establish a clear environmental standard beyond which the state will deny a water request, even in cases where streams are at risk of drying up completely. This is a serious omission.



Great Blue Heron. Photo by David Griffin.

Second, we are concerned that the state's extremely flexible approach to offsetting the environmental impacts of new or increased withdrawals may allow streams to get worse over time. Third, we believe there should be clear, measurable goals for minimizing impacts to depleted streams. Finally, we would like to see the new rules apply to all water withdrawals. Currently, the rules will apply only to communities where at least a portion of their water use consists of new or increased water withdrawals since the 1986 enactment of the Water Management Act (about 40% of all withdrawals).

We and our many partner organizations will continue to advocate for these changes once the regulations come out, and we'll have several opportunities to work on improvements in the coming months before they are finalized.

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good recent example is the new constructed wetland in Cambridge (at Alewife) that absorbs lightly treated stormwater and provides natural and beautiful wildlife habitat and walking paths in a highly urbanized area. Constructing the project cost about half as much as traditional stormwater treatment, and will cost far less to maintain (with annual savings estimated in the millions).

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance and our partner organizations successfully supported the inclusion of these provisions in the senate bill:

- Planning grants for municipalities
- Increased investment in green infrastructure
- Establishment of municipal water banks to help offset the environmental impacts of new development
- Inclusion of financial “best management practices” requirement for grant applicants, including full-cost pricing by water and sewer utilities.

Many thanks to those of you who spoke to your senators about this bill, and to our partners at The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land, Clean Water Action, Charles River

Watershed Association, Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee, Environmental League of Massachusetts, and Conservation Law Foundation.

The Alliance files an amicus brief at the Supreme Judicial Court!

Massachusetts Rivers Alliance was pleased to join four of our member watershed groups (Charles, Jones, Taunton, and North and South Rivers) as amici in a brief filed on our behalf by the Harvard Law Clinic opposing the siting of a power plant in Brockton due to impacts on the area's already-stressed water resources. In this complex case, the SJC is reviewing among other issues, the decision to deny a power plant use of potable water for its operations. We encouraged the SJC to support Massachusetts Water Policy, which recommends that municipalities live within their water budgets, promote development strategies consistent with sustainable water resource management and restore impaired waters. Oral arguments took place on March 4th and a decision is expected by summer.

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Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

The Alliance's mission is to protect and restore rivers across the Commonwealth.

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The Alliance is growing, thanks to you!

Last year a generous gift from a donor enabled us to undertake a major membership growth initiative – and we more than doubled our individual and family memberships! So if you are a new member, welcome! And if you joined before 2013, thank you for your loyal and continued support (you early adopter, you)! As an alliance of organizations (50+), many of which operate on extremely small budgets, we are dependent on individual support for our continued existence. We are grateful for your support for the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance.

Director honored

Our very own Julia Blatt has been named the recipient of the Charles River Watershed Association's 2014 "Anne M. Blackburn Award." This award, created in honor of environmental activist Anne Blackburn, is presented annually to an individual who has made significant contributions over a career that has resulted in singular improvements for the Charles River in Massachusetts, its watershed and the natural environment. The Charles River Watershed Association is a valued partner in our work, and we are very proud of this honor.