Rivers win big in state budget

We did it! We made the case, and our legislators listened. For the first time in over a decade, state legislators significantly increased operating funding for the Massachusetts environmental agencies charged with protecting and restoring our rivers. After enduring many years of staff and budget cuts, all three of our budget priorities received additional funding for FY2019. These agencies are the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the Division of Ecological Restoration and the Department of Conservation and Recreation’s Office of Water Resources.

These funds will directly help improve river health, climate resiliency, and public health through more removals of outdated and dangerous dams, culvert replacements that improve fish passage, expanded water quality monitoring programming, enforcement of laws that protect against water pollution, and increased flood, drought and climate change resiliency planning. These programs are critical to water protection, river restoration, and climate change adaptation in our state.

Finally, we’d like acknowledge the strong support for these programs by our colleagues at the Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers and Scientists.

Legislature votes to keep water pollution program with EPA - again!

Earlier this year, thanks to the advocacy of our organization and our members, the Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture sent to study legislation proposed by Governor Baker to transfer authority from the federal government (Environmental Protection Agency) to the state (Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection) to regulate water pollution. This means the bill (H.2777) did not move forward during this session.

Mass Rivers and nearly all our member groups strongly oppose authorizing the state to take over water pollution control programs from the federal government at this time. Proposed funding for this program was unstable and insufficient, program design was inadequate, and this change could harm water quality – permanently – in our state. We made the case for our rivers, and once again our legislators listened.

We are pleased that our work with the legislature also increased awareness about staffing and programmatic needs for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) and led to more funding to support MassDEP’s current water programs. Whether or not Governor Baker tries again to take control of this water pollution program from EPA, it is crucial that MassDEP has sufficient funding to protect our rivers.

A big thank you to you, our member organizations and individual members for testifying, sitting down to talk with legislators, signing on to our letters or sending your own, sending out action alerts, and calling or emailing your legislators to educate them about this issue!
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Equally important, the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance connects, convenes, and strengthens its 72 member groups. Mass Rivers staff stay in close touch with these organizations to make sure our priorities match theirs. We owe our success to the vision of our founders, the hard work and talent of our organizational members and our loyal, generous individual donors. Rivers – and the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance – had an unusually successful year in 2018. You can read the good news in this issue of The River Advocate. Thank you again for your support, and I look forward to seeing you at our Annual Meeting and Dinner on December 5.

Mossi Rivers Organizational Members:

Association to Prevent Cape Cod
Almont Citizens Forum
Belleville Environmental Action Team
Belleville Nature Resources Council
Berkshire Regional Intelligent River Action Team
Blackstone River Coalition
Brockton Conservation Trust
Buxton Bay Coalition
Center for Coasts & Shores
Chatsu River Conservancy
Charles River Watershed Association
Charlestown Waterfront Coalition
Chicopee Rivers Watershed Council
Clean River Project
Clean Water Action
Connecticut River Watershed Council
Conservation Law Foundation
Dearfield River Watershed Trust Unlimted Environment Massachusetts
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Fox River Watershed Council
Friends of the Blue Hills
Friends of the Assabet River
Friends of the Narragansett Bay
Greater Northfield Watershed Association
Green Decade Newton
Groundwork Lawrence
Hosic River Revival
Hosic River Watershed Association
Hop Brook Protection Association
Houlton Valley Association
Ipswich River Watershed Council
Jamaica River Watershed Association
Keith Land Trust
League of Women Voters Massachusetts
Lowell/Powells & Conservation Trust
Mansfield Audubon
Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
Massachusetts Watershed Coalition
Meatpack River Watershed Council
Middlesex/Waltham Watershed Council
Mystic River Watershed Association
Nantucket River Watershed Association
Northeast River Watershed Association
North and South Rivers Watershed Association
OAR, for the Assabet, Sudbury, & Concord Rivers
Ocean River Institute
Parker River Clean Water Action
River Rolling
Save the Bay - Narragansett Bay
Save the Bay - Rhode Island
Save the Bay - Somers Point
Seabrook River Coalition
Shrewsbury River Watershed Association
Society of the Essex Institute
Sudbury Valley Trustees
Sudbury - Assabet and Concord Wild & Scenic River Stewardship Council
Taunton River Watershed Alliance
Taunton River Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council
Ten Mile River Watershed Council
The Watershed Coalition
Trout Unlimited, Greater Boston Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Pioneer Valley Chapter
Waban Woods Project
Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee (WSCAC)
Watered Action Alliance of Southeastern MA
West River Watershed Association
Westfield River Watershed Association
Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee
Westport River Watershed Alliance

Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection staff sample for water quality measurements on the Neponset River. Photo by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

TEN YEARS OUT FRONT FOR OUR RIVERS

In 2007, the founders of the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance created a new organization to fill a persistent gap in the state’s environmental advocacy landscape. At the time, land, transportation, and energy, advocates were working actively at the state level to improve funding and policies to advance their causes, and our state benefited from their efforts.

Rivers...not so much. While Massachusetts was fortunate to have about 20 watershed organizations working diligently to improve their local rivers, most lacked the resources to take on state policy. Without an organization that worked consistently on behalf of all the state’s rivers, when decisions were made about water, the state’s 10,000 miles of rivers lacked a seat at the table.

With your support, together we’ve claimed that seat for our rivers. In the ten years since the creation of Mass Rivers, we’ve shepherded an improvement in state policies that keep more water in our rivers; increased funding to repair our aging infrastructure, educated civil servants and consultants on engineering solutions that protect wildlife and public safety, improved drought response, and increased funding for state environmental protection agencies. Along the way we have successfully opposed policies that would have hurt our rivers. Mass Rivers is now the go-to organization on water, serving as a resource for our colleagues in the environmental movement, government staff, legislators, and others. We’re proud to be fulfilling our founders’ vision.

Federal lawsuit ends in victory for rivers

Following a lawsuit filed by Mass Rivers and nine co-plaintiff environmental groups, a long-awaited federal stormwater permit went into effect for Massachusetts on July 1st. The permit requires cities and towns to take steps to protect watersways from polluted stormwater runoff. “Stormwater runoff,” it rain and snowmelt that runs over streets, yards, farms or rooftops, does not soak into the ground. Stormwater often contains a mixture of pollutants that flows down storm drains into watersways the public relies on for drinking water and recreation.

At stake in our lawsuit was the revised Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System, or MS 4, permit, which was originally supposed to take effect in July 2017. Two days before its effective date, then U.S. EPA Chief Scott Pruitt unilaterally delayed implementing the permit for another year, even though it was already 10 years overdue. In response, we sued the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), arguing that Pruitt’s action was illegal, undermined protections to the environment, and put the health of Massachusetts residents and water bodies at risk. The watershed associations in our lawsuit included the Connecticut River Conservancy, Ipswich River Watershed Association, Jones River Watershed Association, Merrimack River Watershed Council, Mystic River Watershed Association, Neponset River Watershed Association, North and South Rivers Watershed Association, OARs and Taunton River Watershed Council.

Faced with our lawsuit, EPA chose not to further delay the permit’s implementation, and on July 1, 2018, allowed the stormwater permit to go into effect. The revised MS4 permit requires towns to update their stormwater management plans, monitor outfall pipes, and prioritize cleanup of the most pressing problems, such as the discharge of untreated sewage into nearby watersways via storm drains.

We were pleased with this outcome and would like to thank our excellent legal team who represented Mass Rivers and the co-plaintiffs in this case, Kevin Casadio of Earthrise Law Center and Access to Justice Fellow Irene C. Freidel.

Long term funding secured for rivers

This year when the state prepared their five-year capital budget for environmental programs, known as the “Environmental Bond,” Mass Rivers worked with legislators to ensure that key river programs would have the resources they needed over the coming years. Thanks to our advocacy efforts and the work of key partner organizations, we doubled the allocated funding for two crucial programs for river protection in Massachusetts: the Division of Ecological Restoration and the Department of Conservation and Recreation Aquatic Invasives Management Program. The Department of Environmental Protection also received a significant increase in funding, a portion of which will support the expansion of their water quality monitoring program.

This increased funding will enable improved management and removal of aquatic invasive plants, more urban river restoration projects, increased cranberry bog restoration initiatives, expanded water quality monitoring and research, and removal of more failing dams and culverts. These exciting projects will improve environmental health and climate resiliency in Massachusetts for years to come.

A special thank you to our summer Mass Rivers Policy Research Interns, Koya Patel (UCLA ’17) and Thomas Coughlin (UMass Amherst ’20).
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- Connecticut River Watershed Council
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- Green Newton
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- North and South River Watershed Association
- OARS
- Parker River Clean Water Association
- Parker River Watershed Association
- Peabody River Watershed Association
- River Street Society
- Save the Bay – Narragansett Bay Riverkeepers
- Save the Bay – Reservoir Coalition
- Save the River
- Sierra Club Massachusetts Chapter
- South Fallsburg Association
- Sudbury, Assabet and Concord Wild & Scenic Rivers Coalition
- Sudbury Reservoir Watershed Coalition
- Ten Mile River Watershed Council
- The Nature Conservancy
- Town Untold, Deerfield River Watershed Chapter
- Towns Unlimited, Blackstone River Watershed Chapter
- Towns Unlimited, Millers River Watershed Chapter
- Towns Unlimited, Mt. Holyoke River Watershed Chapter
- Tree Streets Coalition
- Trustees of Reservations
- Umbrella Watershed Coalition
- Walker Supply Citizens Advisory Committee
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October 2018

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