Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

The RIVER Advocate

HEALTHY RIVERS FOR PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE

FALL 2016

Tackling the big drought

Like earthquakes, monsoons, and tornadoes, we think of drought as something that happens to other people, in other places. Not this year. Beginning last fall, Massachusetts has seen below-average precipitation every month except February, with almost no rainfall at all in the summer months, especially in the eastern half of the state.

By August, many rivers had dropped to historic lows, and tributaries around the state had dried up, as did several mainstem rivers, such as the Ipswich and parts of the Parker. The dry riverbeds wrought havoc on plant and wildlife, with the drought blamed for fish kills, turtles deaths, and even botulism in ducks. Groundwater tables also fell to dangerous levels, threatening water supplies in some areas. Farmers suffered substantial crop losses.

While we can't prevent droughts, we can improve the way we manage water in a drought. This became very clear this summer, as the state environmental agencies seemed to have been caught unprepared by the length and severity of this drought. By the time the Baker administration got the message out to towns that they should impose additional water restrictions, the opportunity for significant summer water conservation - which could have lessened the effects of this drought - was largely lost.

Despite extreme drought in parts of the Commonwealth, outdoor watering restrictions are voluntary for many communities across the state. Until the governor declares a "Drought Emergency," the state lacks the authority to impose mandatory uniform watering restrictions for communities affected by drought. As a result, we are left with a confusing patchwork of restrictions, imposed town-by-town, difficult to enforce. It's too little, too late.

Winthrop Bridge over the Ipswich River, **June 2016**.

Winthrop Bridge over the Ipswich River, **September 2016**. *Photos by Suzanne Sullivan.*

THE GOOD NEWS is that both legislators and members of the administration recognize that the state's current Drought Management Plan is inadequate. This summer, together with our member groups, Mass Rivers advocated vigorously for improved drought management. We are now working with policymakers to update the plan so that environmental protection is an integral part, water conservation requirements are triggered earlier in a drought, and outdoor watering restrictions are imposed more uniformly across the affected region. Climate change scientists tell us we will be seeing more of these droughts in the future, so we need to get this right.

OCTOBER, 2016

From the Director

STRONGER TOGETHER: MAKING RIVERS GREAT AGAIN

Wow, what a year. The Mass Rivers Alliance came together repeatedly to protect our rivers, and – it worked!

First came Governor Baker's executive order directing state agencies to review regulations to make sure state protections did not exceed those of the federal government. Our members went to work reviewing regulations, attending public listening sessions, weighing in with letters and emails and speaking up for strong protection for rivers, streams, wildlife, and wetlands. After the dust settled this spring, we saw no significant weakening of important protections.

Next, the governor proposed a state takeover of the federal water pollution control program, and again we sprung into action. Noting that current state water quality programs are severely underfunded, and concerned that this change could harm water quality, we opposed it. Our members across the state wrote letters, made phone calls, testified on Beacon Hill, and met with their elected representatives. Our legislators listened, and the legislation didn't progress this year. Next year we hope to work with legislators and the administration to instead restore funding for existing, critical programs, like water quality monitoring, assessments, facilities inspections, compliance, and enforcement.

Just when we thought we'd earned a little rest….along came the worst drought our state has experienced in 40 years. Our members around the state told us their streams had dried up, a disaster for wildlife. Dismayed by the state's slow (and inadequate) response to this crisis, we organized once more. We urged state leaders to declare a severe drought in eastern Massachusetts and asked residents to stop watering their lawns (they did). The Boston Globe and other media covered the story and helped get the message out. We're now working with legislators and the administration to improve the state's response to future droughts.

None of this could have happened without an active group of smart, passionate advocates – we're proud to claim 63 member organizations (including two in RI – we've gone national!). And we could not do this without the generous support of you, our contributing members. Our members – organizations and individual supporters – are the greatest. Thank you.

Julia

Photo by Mark Lindhult

Mass Rivers Organizational Members

AMC Berkshire Chapter
Belmont Citizens Forum
Berkshire Environmental Action Team
Berkshire Natural Resources Council
Blackstone River Coalition
Boxborough Conservation Trust
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
Friends of Alewife Reservation
Friends of the Assabet River NWR
Friends of the Blue Hills
Friends of the Malden River
Greater Northfield Watershed Association
Green Berkshires
Green Newton
Greenbelt
Groundwork Lawrence
Hoosic River Revival
Hoosic River Watershed Association
Hop Brook Protection Association
Housatonic Valley Association
Ipswich River Watershed Association*
Jones River Watershed Association
Kestrel Land Trust
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust
Mass Audubon
Massachusetts Assoc. of Conservation Comm.
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
Mass Org of State Engineers and Scientists (MOSES)
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
Save the Bay – Narragansett Bay Riverkeeper
Sea Run Brook Trout Coalition
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
Ten Mile River Watershed Council
The Nature Conservancy*
The Trust for Public Land
The Trustees
Trout Unlimited, Greater Boston Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Pioneer Valley Chapter
Wastewater Advisory Committee (WAC)
Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee (WSCAC)
Weir River Watershed Association
Westfield River Watershed Association
Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee
Westport River Watershed Alliance

**** Leadership members***

Feds keep control of water pollution regulatory powers (for now)

Mass Rivers and our member groups successfully opposed a bill this spring that would have been the first step toward shifting control to the state for regulating water pollution in Massachusetts. Should this effort eventually succeed, water pollution controls - and the cost of the program - will pass from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP).

We had several concerns about this proposal. The first is that MassDEP's current water programs are woefully underfunded and inadequate. These include monitoring and assessing water quality, inspecting water treatment facilities, and enforcing compliance with the Clean Water Act. We would like to see the state commit the necessary resources to these basic water quality programs before taking on a big new responsibility.

Second, the proposed mechanism for funding the new program is unsustainable and insufficient. MassDEP suggested adding a new line item to its budget which we know from past experience is extremely vulnerable to cuts. In fact, MassDEP has seen numerous budget cuts over the past few years, losing about one-third of its staff since 2008. Additionally, the amount requested was $3-5M less than past funding estimates to run the program.

Finally, we are concerned that the impetus to take over water pollution control from the feds may be to reduce town budgets at the expense of the environment. Regulating the management of municipal stormwater and wastewater is a major part of the program currently run by EPA. Proponents for state control claim that the shift from the EPA will result in potential cost-saving measures for towns. Many of the strongest supporters for state control have been involved in ongoing legal disputes with the EPA over water pollution enforcement. We are concerned that the result of moving control from EPA to MassDEP in the current environment could harm water quality.

Mass Rivers and many of our member organizations came together this spring to communicate these concerns to legislators and members of the administration. We advocated for a "fix it first" approach to shore up MassDEP's struggling water quality programs. Unfortunately, this year's budget shortfall made that a difficult ask. However, we were pleased that our legislators listened to our concerns and determined the proposed bill was not ready for action by the legislature.

We would like to extend a big thank you to our many members who worked with us on this issue this year. We would also like to thank Senator Gobi, Representative Schmid, Senator Eldridge, Representative Dykema, and the other members of the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture, who took the time to listen carefully to our concerns, and educate themselves about water pollution regulation. We expect this issue to come back and we look forward to working to keep the protection of our rivers in the forefront next session.

New faces at Mass Rivers

We're growing! On June 1, Policy Specialist Gabby Queenan joined our staff. A recent graduate of Macalester College with a BA in Environmental Studies and Political Science, Gabby brings to her job a passion for rivers and a talent for policy. We were delighted that a grant from the Foundation for Metrowest enabled us to bring back Susan Beede (our former Policy Director) to work on a project to help Mass Rivers member organizations use the new Water Management Act regulations to help protect their local rivers. David Antos, our summer intern and senior at the University of Maryland, researched state and federal water pollution programs across the country.

Susan Beede (Special Projects), David Antos (summer intern), Julia Blatt (Executive Director), Gabby Queenan (our new Policy Specialist) and Elissa Grad (Development and Operations Manager). *Photo by ELM.*

Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

Mass Rivers' mission is to protect and restore rivers across the Commonwealth.

Board Officers

Ian Cooke, *President*
Pamela Resor, *Vice President*
Mark P. Smith, *Treasurer*
Andrea Donlon, *Clerk*

Board Members

Paul Beaulieu, Wayne Castonguay, Garry Crago, Judith Eiseman, Andrea Franz, Judith Grinnell, Nancy Hammett, Andrew Magee, Nagesh Mahanthappa, Deirdre Menoyo, Heidi Ricci, Sally Schnitzer, Kelsey Smithwood

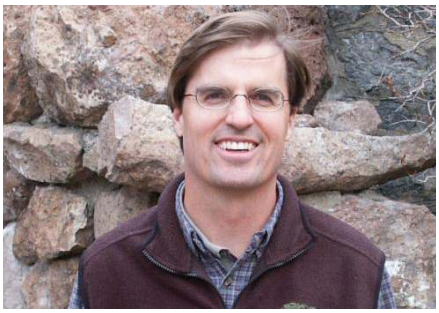
Staff

Julia Blatt, *Executive Director*
Gabby Queenan, *Policy Specialist*
Elissa Grad, *Development & Ops Manager*

Save the date for our Annual Meeting on December 7th!

Guest speaker: President of the Wilderness Society, Jamie Williams

Call of the Wild: Protecting wild places in an era of partisan politics



Please join us for the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance's 2016 Annual Meeting and dinner on **Wednesday December 7th, 6-9pm** at the First Church in Belmont. We are shaking things up this year with a new venue and a presentation by **Jamie Williams**, a national conservation leader, to talk to us about protecting nature's special places in a very fractious political landscape.

This year we will also be honoring the outstanding work and dedication to our rivers by **EkOngKar (EK) Singh Khalsa**, former ED of the Mystic River Watershed Association and **Kathy Baskin**, former Director of Water Policy for the Commonwealth.

Event details and tickets are available on the Mass Rivers website (massriversalliance.org) Questions? Call Elissa Grad at (857) 445-0208.