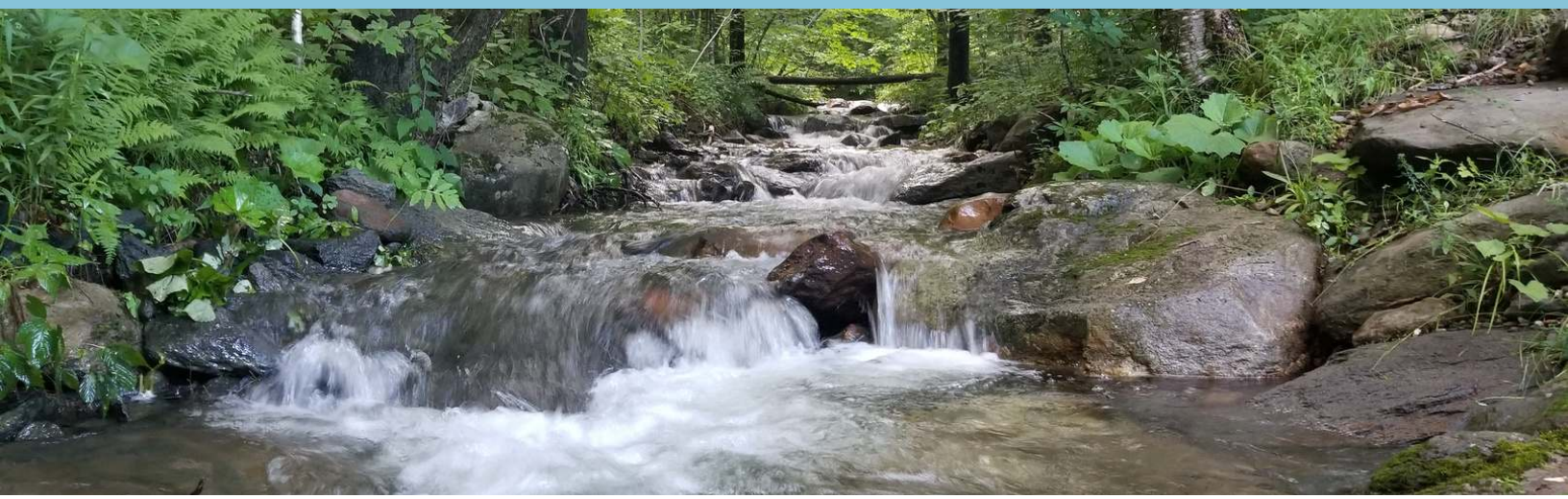
MASSACHUSETTS Rivers Alliance

Spring 2025

# The River Advocate

Healthy rivers for people and wildlife



## Our 2025-2026 Legislative Priorities

The start of 2025 began a new two-year legislative cycle in Massachusetts and Mass Rivers will be there every step of the way to advocate for strong environmental and climate policies that will protect and restore our rivers!

Speaking up - through advocacy and lobbying - ensures that lawmakers prioritize clean water, promote ecological restoration, build climate-resilience, and help us ensure a sustainable water future. But no single organization can do this work alone - we build coalitions that bring together scientists, advocates, and communities to amplify our voices and push for lasting change.

**In collaboration with our 80+ member organizations and other partners, our legislative priorities for this session include:**

### The Drought Bill (H1003 /S586)

Massachusetts currently responds to drought with a confusing patchwork of conservation measures which vary by municipality, limiting their effectiveness. This bill will **modernize drought management by creating a clearer, more coordinated response in Massachusetts, and help keep our water supplies and rivers healthy in a changing climate**.

### Environmental Bond Advocacy

Approximately once every five years the legislature passes an Environmental Bond Bill, funding a variety of capital costs that support the state's environment and climate resiliency programs. **Mass Rivers has been working closely with partners to advocate for investments that support climate resilience, including increasing the budget for the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness program, water quality monitoring funding, and water future planning.**

### Nature for All Bill (H901/S597)

**One of the most important ways to help our rivers and streams is to protect the land around them.** This bill would dedicate funding from the existing tax on sales of sporting goods to be used for the conservation and restoration of land, water, and urban greenspace.

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# From the Executive Director

## As I write this, I'm experiencing déjà vu...

In 2017, following the newly-installed Trump administration's announcement of planned drastic budget cuts to the EPA, and a proposed weakening of the agency's ability to fulfill its mission to protect human health, and the environment, we held a rally. Mass Rivers staff, some board members, and several of our partner organizations showed up in front of EPA Region 1 in Boston with signs showing our support, homemade cookies, friendly waves, and thumbs' ups for the staff as they emerged at lunchtime from their office building. I don't remember who organized this somewhat impromptu event, but I do know we were all in, and happy to do it.

Last weekend I happened to see an EPA employee, who brought up that rally from 2017, and told me the show of support from the public had meant a lot to these public servants, who were feeling anxious and demoralized.

**Here we go again.**

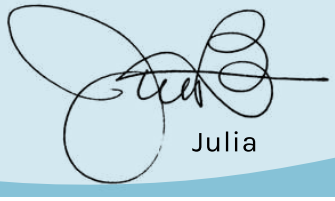
Federal leaders, from the president on down, do not seem to think the federal government should have a role in protecting our environment, or at most, this role should be minimal. If you doubt this, check out the recent news, which includes a planned 65% cut to the EPA's budget, a Supreme Court decision stomping on the EPA's right to regulate water pollution, and attacks on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA is guilty of bringing us...accurate weather forecasts. Last week, I heard the US Geological Service's leases in Massachusetts have been terminated – USGS is a longtime partner for our state agencies, providing data collection and analyses that guide streamflow protection, drought determinations, and water allocation decisions. There is plenty more where this came from, and I'm sure there will be new developments by the time you read this.

**So what does that mean for us at Mass Rivers?**

It means that our work at the state level is even more important than before. While I hope that the state's federal partners at the EPA, NOAA, USGS, and other agencies will continue to make progress toward their various scientific, environmental, and health and safety missions, in the near term our own state environmental agencies will have to shoulder more than their usual share of the burden of protecting human health and the environment. They will have to do this with fewer federal partners and fewer federal dollars. We will continue to help strengthen state environmental protection by using the tools that have proven effective in the past – partnership, advocacy, education, legislative action, and, when necessary, litigation. Mass Rivers staff now serve on more than 30 commissions, committees, advisory groups, task forces, and other forums where we can weigh in on behalf of rivers, climate resiliency, and environmental justice in a meaningful way. Together with our 80+ member organizations we have grown into a powerful movement.

As for some of the excuses – and they are excuses, not reasons – for defunding the EPA, a small but important federal agency, one of the weakest I've heard came from a spokesperson for the new federal administration, who stated that the EPA is "bloated." This does not pass the straight face test. EPA's Region 1 has been chronically underfunded since I began paying attention, which was in 1998, when someone there explained to me that the reason it took so long for them to issue water pollution control permits was that each one had to be carefully reviewed by lawyers because most of them were appealed, and the EPA did not want to lose in court. Region 1 almost never loses in court, but because there have never been enough lawyers for this task, the permits trickle out slowly. Similarly, there have never been enough people to review municipal stormwater compliance reports or address combined sewer overflow problems around the state. From my perspective, the agency has been in a state of triage for decades, addressing the highest priority problems as best they can. The sensible solution to this problem is not to impose further budget cuts, but to increase our investment in this critically important work. The EPA is our main bulwark against dirty, dangerous water. We should all be concerned when the agency and its work are not robustly supported.

We are also planning to rally again this spring. Thank you for supporting our public servants – and for supporting Mass Rivers.



Julia

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## Operating Budget Advocacy

We advocate for investments in our state environmental agencies each year, with a focus on rivers and water. This work has yielded significant results for two agencies that focus on water quality, streamflow protection, and habitat restoration - the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) and Department of Fish and Game's Division of Ecological Restoration (DER).

**These two agencies' annual operating budgets have increased from $32 million to $54.3 million (MassDEP) and $2.1 million to $5.5 million (DER) since FY2020.**

## Other bills we support:

- An Act Providing for the Establishment of Sustainable Water Resource Funds (S1443/H2324)
- An Act Investing in Natural & Working Lands (H1005/S549)
- An Act Accelerating Wetland Restoration (H1052/S557)
- An Act Pertaining to Regional Resilience and Flood Protection Entities (S658/HD3411)

## Dam Busters is Growing

If you've ever walked along a small stream and noticed an old, seemingly useless dam along its length, you're not alone.

**Massachusetts has over 3,000 old, unsafe, and defunct dams on its 8,000 miles of rivers.**

Recognizing the negative effects these dams can have on streamflows, water quality, river habitats, recreation, and ultimately, climate resilience, Mass Rivers decided to take on the challenge. We partnered with the Charles River Watershed Association and the Massachusetts Division of Ecological Restoration to create the Dam Busters free monthly lunchtime webinar series.

What began in 2023 with the goal of demystifying the dam removal process has now become a go-to information source for dam removers across the country.

*Mass Rivers staff and speakers at the Dam Busters site visit in Acton, Fall 2024*

*Dam Busters site visit in Braintree, Fall 2024*

We started with "Dam Busters 101" (2023-24) offering "lunchinars" on basic topics in dam removal such as financing, community engagement, Indigenous approaches to dam removal, and sediment management.

This year's "Dam Busters 201" kicked off in January with a very popular session by Dr. Noah Snyder of Boston College on the history of dam removal in New England. We'll be moving on to more in-depth discussions of the difficulties that dam removal teams face in garnering community support, finding creative options to finance projects, and working with local officials like Conservation Commissions. There's so much demand for information that we plan to hold more than one webinar a month for a couple of months this year. When this project started, we aimed to attract a statewide audience.

**We now have over 660 people from 155 towns across Massachusetts, as well as 15 additional states, and four different countries signed up for the series. And more are joining each day.**

As the series grows, we look forward to hearing more from participants about how Dam Busters helps them work towards climate resilience in their communities.

# Drought all Winter?

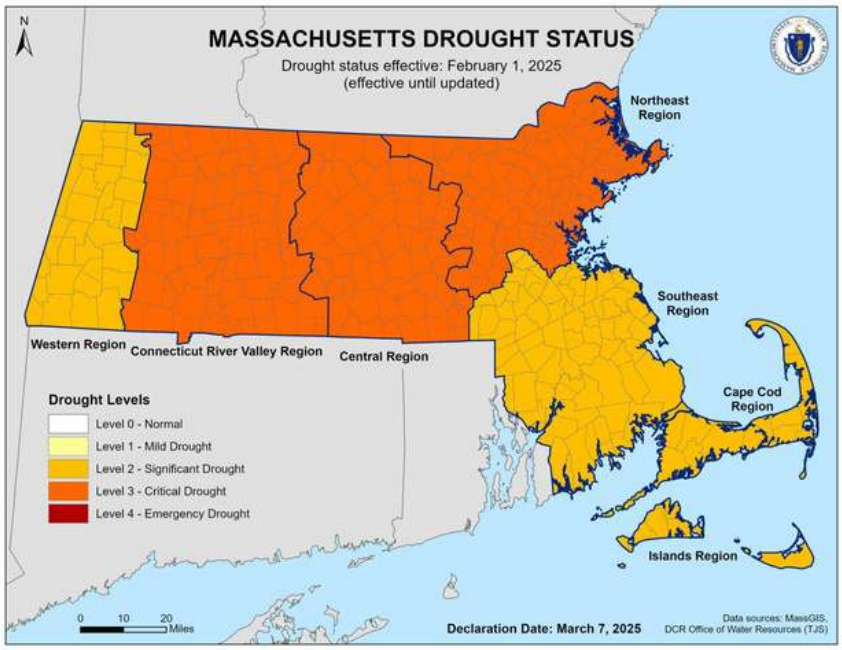
**Massachusetts entered a period of drought last August, and the state has not yet recovered.**

Conditions were severe in October and November, resulting in extremely high wildfire counts well outside of the normal fire season of March-May. Conditions recovered somewhat in December, but unfortunately there was not a lot of precipitation in January and February, and the situation worsened again.

As of March 7th, the drought status in MA is at Level 3 - Critical Drought in the Connecticut River Valley, Central and Northeast Regions, and a Level 2 - Significant Drought in the Western, Southeast, Cape Cod and Islands Regions.

*Cascade Brook outside of Worcester, MA on November 15th, 2024 with no visible flow in the brook. Photo courtesy of Elsie Uffelman of the Blackstone River Coalition*

This long lasting and severe drought shows that we need to strengthen and standardize responses to drought across the state, which we hope to accomplish by passing the Drought Bill (S586/H1003). Read more about the Drought Bill and how drought is handled in Massachusetts, via the briefs on our new publications website page: https://www.massriversalliance.org/publications.




*Massachusetts Drought status effective February 1, 2025*

# Stormwater News

**The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which regulates stormwater pollution in Massachusetts, released two draft permits at the end of 2024.** Stormwater pollution is one of the biggest sources of aquatic pollution in the state. Once finalized, these new permits will more effectively control and reduce stormwater pollution in Massachusetts. The Small Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System Permit, or Small MS4, addresses pollutants in stormwater runoff coming from municipally-owned storm sewer systems. The second permit, issued using the EPA's Residual Designation Authority, or RDA, restricts stormwater runoff from privately-owned commercial, industrial, and institutional properties with over an acre of impervious cover within the watersheds surrounding Boston Harbor.

The RDA permit had a comment deadline of March 17th, 2025 and the MS4 Permit has a comment deadline of May 21st, 2025. Mass Rivers worked with our member organizations to submit comment letters on both draft permits, supporting the improvements proposed in the draft permits and recommending actions to further improve water quality!

Mass Rivers convened a working group of representatives from Charles River Watershed Association, Ipswich River Watershed Association, Mystic River Watershed Association, Neponset River Watershed Association, OARS, and Save the Bay-Narragansett Bay to prepare comments on the MS4 Permit, and collaborated with Charles, Mystic, and Neponset River Watershed Association on comment letters for the RDA permit.

**To learn more about stormwater permits, check out Mass Rivers' Stormwater Spotlight Series on the blog on our website.**

# Welcome Heather!

**Please join us in welcoming our new Policy Director, Heather Clish!** Many in our community already know Heather, a longtime leader at the Appalachian Mountain Club, where most recently she served as Vice President for Conservation and Recreation Advocacy. In this role, she guided policy and legislative initiatives to protect and restore lands and water across the Northeast and create more equitable access to nature. Driven by a passion for the relationship between people and nature, Heather is skilled at leading coalitions, and has led efforts to secure millions for land conservation and watershed protection in state and federal appropriations, and also led the effort to establish the New England National Scenic Trail, with a community-based partnership structure modeled on the northeast Wild and Scenic River management approaches. She has collaborated frequently with Mass Rivers in support of river restoration and water quality.

We are beyond thrilled to add Heather to our team, where she will lead our advocacy program, Lobby for the Rivers Day (coming October 8th), and a new capacity building program for our member groups.

# Mass Rivers Organizational Members

### River Champion ($5,000 plus)

Mass Audubon
The Nature Conservancy
Ipswich River Watershed Association

### River Guardian ($2,000 - $4,999)

Neponset River Watershed Association
Charles River Watershed Association

### River Steward ($1,000 - $1,999)

Mass Organization of State Engineers and Scientists
Mystic River Watershed Association
Trout Unlimited, Nor'East Chapter

### River Sustainer ($500 - $999)

Connecticut River Conservancy
Conservation Law Foundation
North and South Rivers Watershed Association
Trout Unlimited, Greater Boston Chapter
Trout Unlimited, MA Council

### River Advocate ($250 - $499)

Association to Preserve Cape Cod
Berkshire Natural Resources Council
The Charles River Conservancy
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Farmington River Watershed Association
Friends of the Middlesex Fells Reservation
Groundwork Lawrence
Interchapter Paddling Committee- AMC
Nantucket Land & Water Council
Nashua River Watershed Association
OARS
Shawsheen River Watershed Association
Sierra Club Massachusetts Chapter
Sudbury, Assabet and Concord Wild and Scenic River Stewardship Council
Taunton River Watershed Alliance
Trout Unlimited, Cape Cod Chapter
The Trustees

### Members (<$250)

Barnstable Cleanwater Coalition
Belmont Citizens Forum
Berkshire Environmental Action Team
Better Futures Project- Communities Responding to Extreme Weather
Blackstone River Coalition
Blackstone River Watershed Association
Buzzards Bay Coalition
Charlesgate Alliance
Clean Water Action Fund
Community Rowing, Inc.
Deerfield River Watershed Association
Environment Massachusetts
The Esplanade Association
Fort River Watershed Alliance
Franklin Land Trust, Inc.
Friends of the Bass River
Friends of Belle Isle Marsh
Friends of the Blue Hills
Friends of Jerry's Pond
Friends of the Malden River
Friends of the Palmer River
Friends of the Ten Mile River Watershed
Friends of Woodlands and Waters
Green Newton
Greenbelt
Hoosic River Revival
Hoosic River Watershed Association
Hop Brook Protection Association
Housatonic Valley Association
Jones River Watershed Association
League of Women Voters of Massachusetts
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust
Massachusetts Association of Conservation Comissions
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
Massachusetts Watershed Coalition
Merrimack River Watershed Council
Millers River Watershed Council
Muddy Water Initiative
New England Section- American Water Works Association
Ocean River Institute
Old Ladies Against Underwater Garbage
Parker River Clean Water Association
Save the Bay – Narragansett Bay Riverkeepers
Sudbury Valley Trustees
Taunton River Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council
Trout Unlimited, Deerfield River Chapter
Trout Unlimited, Pioneer Valley Chapter #276
Wareham Land Trust
Wastewater Advisory Committee to the MWRA
Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee
Weir River Watershed Association
Western MA Rights of Nature
Westfield River Watershed Association
Westfield River Wild & Scenic River Advisory Committee
Westport River Watershed Alliance

MASSACHUSETTS
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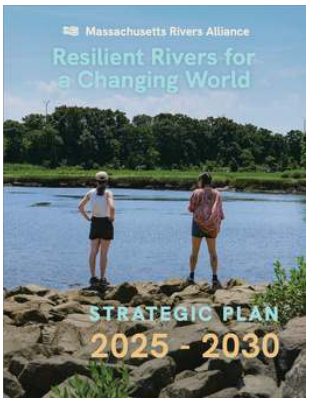
# New Strategic Plan and Publications Webpage!




As the only statewide organization focused exclusively on the health and sustainability of our rivers and streams, Mass Rivers is uniquely positioned to address the water challenges we face. In our brand new Strategic Plan, we are excited to reach higher, dream bigger, and continue to grow our movement for rivers.

Check out our latest 2025-2030 Strategic Plan, and other publications on our website: https://www.massriversalliance.org/publications