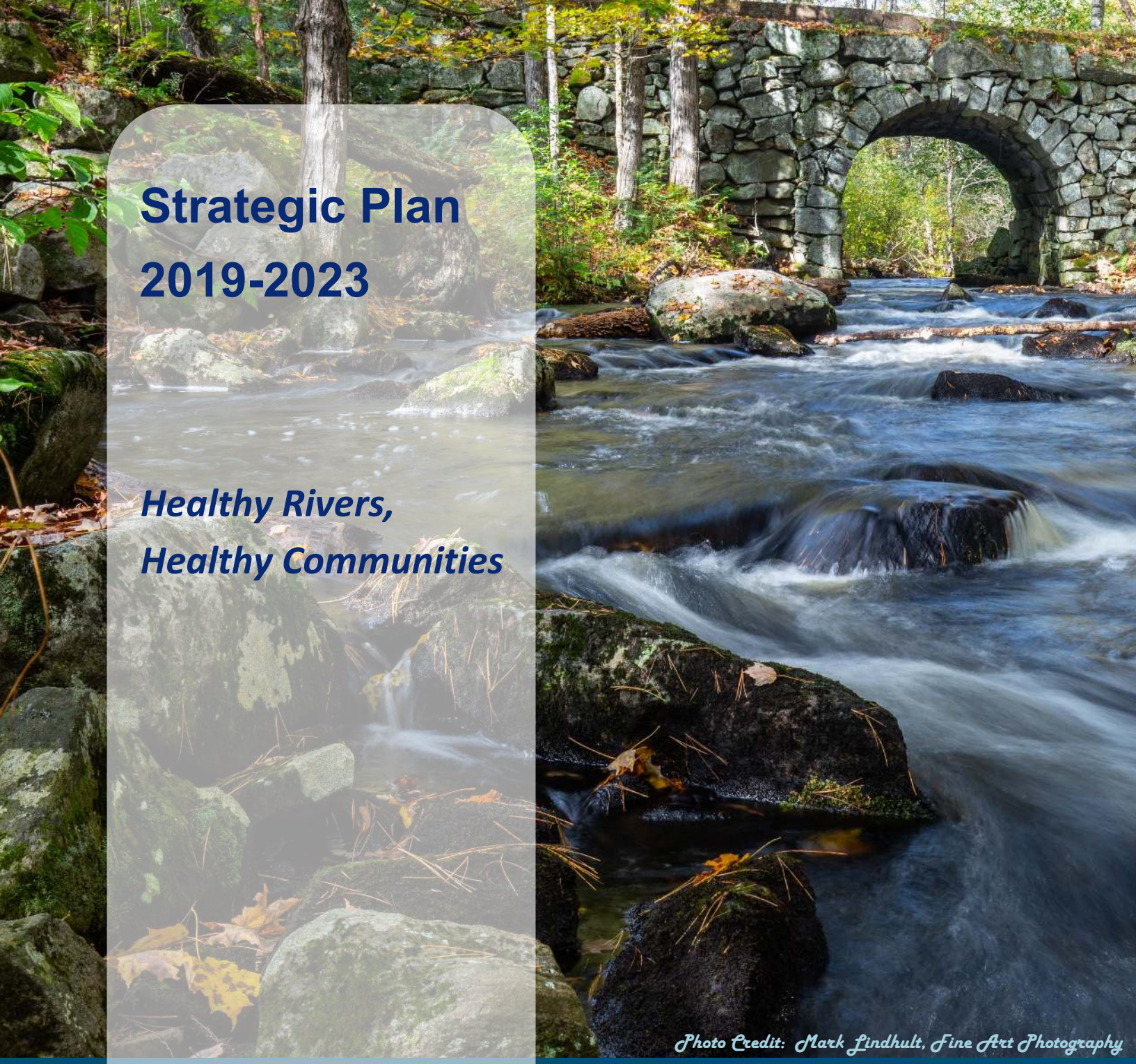


Strategic Plan 2019-2023

Healthy Rivers, Healthy Communities

Photo Credit: Mark Lindhult, Fine Art Photography

APRIL 2019

Massachusetts Rivers Alliance
Approved by the Board of Directors on April 4, 2019.

MASSACHUSETTS
Rivers Alliance

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Vision 4

Mission 5

Guiding Principles 5

Goals for Massachusetts Rivers 6

Goal 1: Water Flow 6

Goal 2: Water Quality 6

Goal 3: Habitat and Natural Systems 7

Goal 4: Connecting People to Rivers 7

Goal 5: Funding for Water Resources 8

Goal 6: Climate Change Resilience 8

Goal 7: Environmental Justice 9

Our Role for River Protection 10

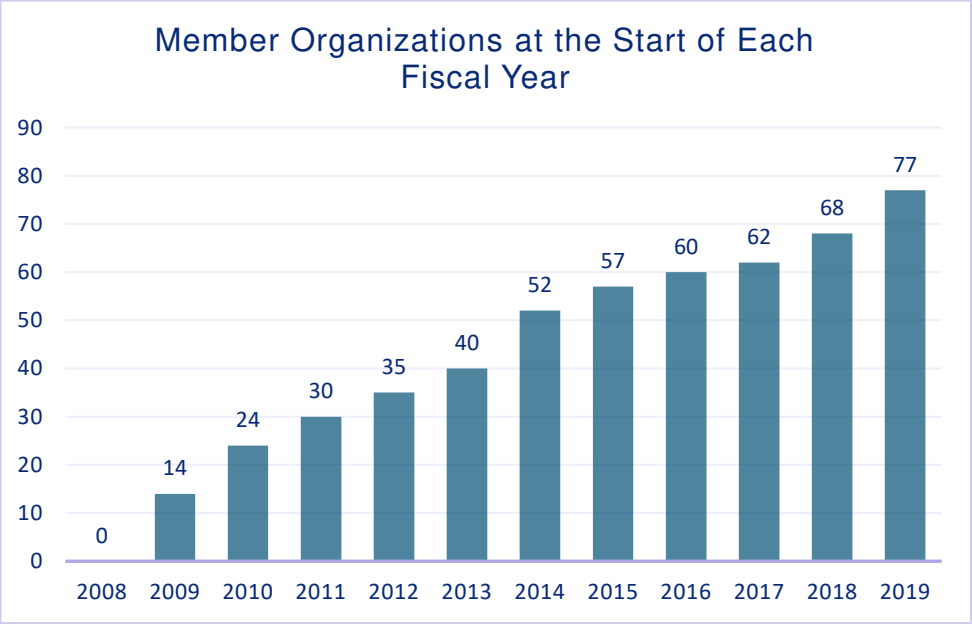
Building a Movement for Rivers: A Five-Year Plan 11

1. *Continue to Be a Strong Voice for Rivers* 11
2. *Strengthen the Movement by Leveling the Playing Field* 12
3. *Increase Our Expertise and Spread the Knowledge* 13
4. *Build Public Awareness and Engagement* 13
5. *Be a Healthy, Nimble Nonprofit* 14

Introduction

A critical time for water. Climate change is increasing the intensity of storms and droughts in Massachusetts. The extreme wet and dry conditions affect not only the health of our rivers, but public health and safety. They make it urgent that we prepare for and manage both droughts and floods. The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is well positioned to promote innovative ideas, advocate for state funding to support smart policies, and work with legislators and government leaders to help meet the challenge.

Why a rivers alliance? In 2007, the founders of the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance created a new organization to fill a gap in the state's environmental advocacy landscape. Land, transportation, and energy all had advocates at the state level to improve funding, laws, policies, and programs to advance their causes. They worked for increased funding for land conservation, tighter goals for fuel emissions reduction, and expanded access to public transportation. However, the state's rivers had no dedicated champion. Massachusetts did then have about 25 watershed organizations working to improve their local rivers. Several Boston-based groups worked on a larger portfolio of statewide environmental issues, which sometimes included water. Yet without an organization that worked consistently on behalf of all the state's rivers, no one could make sure that rivers had a seat at the table – and a strong voice to speak up for them. Water pollution, dry streams, the spread of invasive plants such as toxic algae, aging water infrastructure, and climate change's increasing floods and droughts went largely unaddressed by the legislature and state administrative agencies.



Photos: Blue Heron and Ducklings by Mark Lindhult. Dragonfly, newt, and frog by Emily Scerbo.

A statewide voice for rivers. The immediate impetus for the new group was the failure of the state's Water Management Act regulations to account for and protect stream flows when the state allocated permission to use water. The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance worked hard to improve that program during a four-year, multi-stakeholder negotiation with the state. But that was just a start. In the six years since, we've had a hand in improving stormwater management, helped draft a law to increase water infrastructure funding, educated 400 municipal staff and consultants about culvert replacements and stormwater utilities, worked with state staff to improve Massachusetts' drought response plan, defeated several proposed bills that would have hurt rivers, and won substantial increases in state budgets for key river protection agencies and programs. 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.

Strengthening the movement. Our member groups are key to our success in improving river protection in Massachusetts. It is essential to our mission to connect, convene, and strengthen them. River protection is particularly challenging because different landscapes and development patterns present different issues. Some member groups focus on pollution control, others on restoring water to dry rivers, protecting land along their trout streams, pulling out invasive aquatic species, removing dams, or improving culverts. Mass Rivers staff stay in close touch with our member groups to build support for our priorities, but also to make sure our goals align with theirs. This is an increasingly challenging task as the membership grows and diversifies. Now we have 77groups in our alliance. Ours is an active, knowledgeable and engaged membership. In our numbers there is strength.

What's next? Our first ten years have taught us important lessons. The consistent growth, engagement, and high retention of member groups validate our founders' belief that there was – and is – a strong need for a statewide voice for rivers. We will continue to strengthen and expand our advocacy at the State House, work in close partnership with state agency staff, and if need be, go to

court to make sure water laws are enforced. We will also continue to expand our federal advocacy, when federal issues affect the rivers here in Massachusetts.

We have other opportunities to make a much bigger difference. We want to increase the effectiveness of our member organizations by adding four new staff to support their efforts. We will help them work with municipalities to decrease stormwater pollution, upgrade culverts, remove dams, and increase their effectiveness in using the Water Management Act, the Clean Water Act, and other state and federal programs. We also envision a robust initiative to raise public awareness around rivers and water issues, and we seek to fill an information and assessment gap around rivers and water in the state. You can read more about our plans on page 12.

The next pages outline our high-level vision for rivers, our mission, and our guiding principles. Next you can read about our goals, including actions we focus on to realize our vision. It's a comprehensive list, but rivers and their challenges are complicated. It will take many environmental groups, state and federal agencies, municipalities, schools and universities, businesses, and members of the public to make all of these things happen. The next section explains the role of the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance in moving our state toward this vision. The final section lays out Mass Rivers' 5-year program goals and staffing needs.

Connecticut River and surrounding communities. Photo by Mark Lindhult.

Vision

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance envisions that by 2050, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts will once again enjoy clean, healthy river systems characterized by:

Enough clean water for current and future generations.

We must ensure that there is clean water to meet the needs of people, our economy, and wildlife into the foreseeable future. We must also minimize flooding and create resilient watersheds for both wet and dry times.

Clean rivers that support a sustainable economy.

The rivers, streams, and wetlands of Massachusetts are critical to our health, safety, and economy. They store and purify drinking water, provide recreational opportunities for residents and tourists, maintain biological diversity, provide spawning grounds for commercially valuable fish such as herring, raise property values, support agiculture and commerce, and protect people and property from flooding. We must maintain and improve those waters.

Healthy rivers flowing through healthy communities, enhancing the quality of life for people and wildlife.

Rivers in Massachusetts should be assets to all of the communities through which they flow, especially those that have historically been disadvantaged or marginalized. We envision healthy rivers flowing through vibrant communities where rivers are respected, enjoyed, and stewarded by a generation that understands that water is a cornerstone of our health, safety, and welfare. Rivers and streams provide parks for residents, learning labs for our children, and habitat for fish and other wildlife. They add natural beauty to our landscapes. Our rivers will thrive in sustainably managed watersheds, where watershed planning includes climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Images, top to bottom: Stock photo; Sudbury River flooding in downtown Wayland (https://www.weather.gov); Atlantic Herring (https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov); Hoosic River restoration plan for south branch (https://hoosicriverrevival.org).

Mission

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is the **voice for all rivers in Massachusetts** – from the cold streams of the Berkshires to the reawakening industrial rivers in our cities to the coastal estuaries of Cape Ann and Cape Cod. We are a coalition of river advocates who work together to champion practices, policies, laws, regulations, and initiatives that further our vision for clean and healthy rivers. **Our mission is to protect and restore the Commonwealth's rivers and streams and to strengthen and connect our member organizations to amplify the impact of our collective efforts toward common goals.**

Guiding Principles

- Healthy rivers, a sustainable water supply, and a sustainable economy go hand in hand. Rivers will sustain us if we help sustain them.
- Every river should be an asset to its community, whether it flows through forest, farmland, suburb, or city. Rivers and waterways are a public asset to be used for the public good.
- Every resident of the Commonwealth has the right to affordable, clean, safe drinking water and outdoor recreation in a healthy environment.
- Decisions about water management should be based on sound science, improve climate resiliency, and meet the needs of both people and nature.
- We will work toward these goals in good faith with all who support sustainable water management; we welcome non-traditional partners and allies.

Setting priorities when new issues emerge

River protection is always changing. To use our limited financial resources and staff time effectively, these factors guide our priorities:

- Does this issue match our mission?
- What is our goal? How will we know if we have succeeded?
- How much impact can our organization make on the issue?
- Are others addressing the issue? What should our role be?
- What resources will be needed?
- Will this effort build capacity and community?
- Will our work improve climate change resiliency and/or environmental justice?
- Is it a high priority for our membership?

Goals for Massachusetts Rivers

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance will continue its leadership in supporting the following goals for rivers through advocacy, support for increased funding, education, convening and connecting stakeholders, and direct action. (See next section, "Our Role for River Protection.")

Goal 1: Water Flow

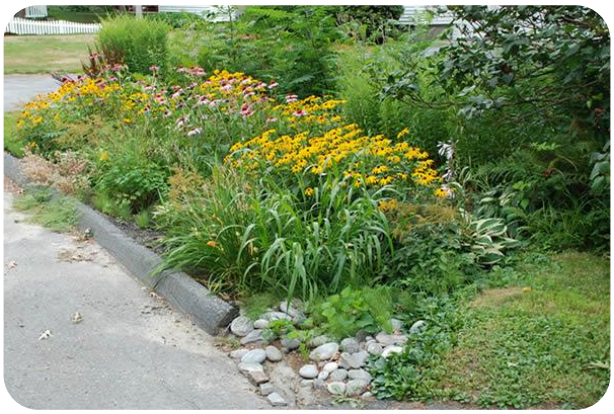
Keep rivers flowing in dry times and minimize flooding in wet times.

1. Improve the way we manage drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater so that our built environment mimics natural water cycles.
2. Use science-based standards for how much water each stream needs to guide water management decisions.
3. Ensure that equal amounts of water enter and leave watersheds and sub-watersheds so that streams and aquifers have the water they need.
4. Keep water local by adopting policies and programs that allow wastewater and stormwater to seep back into the ground to replenish aquifers.
5. Develop financial and regulatory incentives to promote stormwater and wastewater recharge.
6. Protect land in floodplains, river corridors, and aquifer recharge areas.
7. Build resilient water management systems that will be better able to cope with climate change impacts, such as intense seasonal rain and drier summers.
8. Promote green infrastructure, such as wetlands and rain gardens, over gray infrastructure such as pipes and culverts.
9. Implement water conservation, efficient water use, and water re-use.

Goal 2: Water Quality

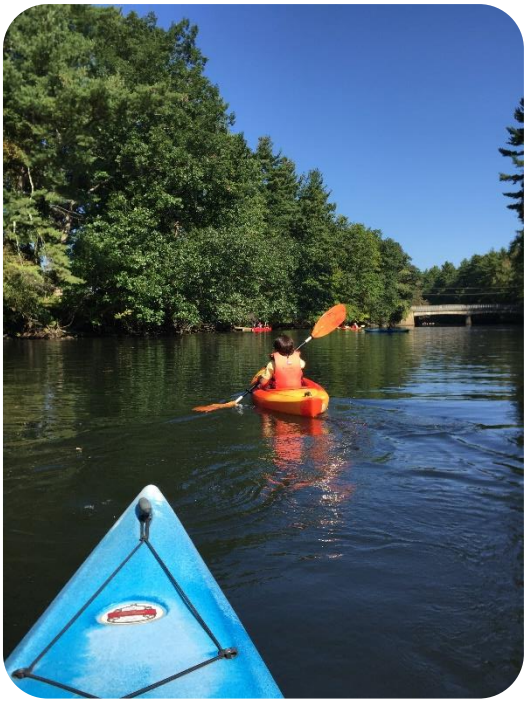
Clean up polluted rivers and make sure clean streams stay that way. All rivers and streams should meet "fishable, swimmable" water quality goals.

1. Require proper treatment of wastewater and promote local recharge of wastewater instead of discharge to surface waters.
2. Reduce pollution from stormwater runoff.
3. Reduce pollution at the source.



Residential rain garden, one form of green infrastructure, in Leominster, MA. Source: EPA Soak Up the Rain public outreach campaign. https://www.epa.gov/soakuptherain

4. Improve understanding of how contaminants such as pharmaceuticals affect the health of people, fish, and other wildlife.
5. Eliminate combined sewer overflows.
6. Support land use planning and land conservation to minimize impervious cover in order to improve watershed health and water quality.



Photos of turtles and kayaking on the Nashua River by Emily Scerbo.

Goal 3: Habitat and Natural Systems

Ensure that rivers support river fish and other aquatic life.

1. Restore stream habitat and connectivity by removing obsolete dams and improving bridges and culverts.
2. Maintain adequate flows and water levels.
3. Restore priority habitat areas, including wetlands, river corridors, and floodplains.
4. Maintain and improve water quality, including protecting the temperature of cold and cool rivers and streams.

Goal 4: Connecting People to Rivers

Ensure that everyone can enjoy local river recreation.

1. Improve access to rivers by creating and maintaining public access points for non-motorized boating.
2. Encourage stream corridor improvements and multi-use riverside trails and parks, especially in urban areas.
3. Protect cold water habitats for trout fishing.
4. Protect river views.
5. Support river programs for youth and families, promoting river festivals and educational programs.
6. Find creative ways to connect rivers to art and music.

Goal 5: Funding for Water Resources

Fill the estimated $38 billion gap between the state's need for water infrastructure improvements and available funds over the next 20 years, with an emphasis on initiatives that have multiple benefits for Mass Rivers' environmental and cultural goals.

1. Support new financing mechanisms to protect water resources and water supplies and to help municipalities update inadequate water infrastructure with green infrastructure.
2. Keep all water supplies protected.
3. Adequately fund state environmental agencies that manage water and ensure compliance with and enforcement of laws protecting rivers, wetlands, and aquifers.
4. Create incentives or rate structures that allow water suppliers to fund their operations, preserve the affordability of water and sewer services, and encourage water conservation.
5. Prioritize State Revolving Fund (SRF) projects according to their environmental benefits and promotion of green infrastructure.

Goal 6: Climate Change Resilience

Support watershed management, ecological restoration, and other innovative approaches to protect waterways from degradation despite increasing floods and droughts.

Connecticut River after hurricane Irene. November 1, 2016. Source: https://www.usgs.gov/media/images/connecticut-river-landsat-image-after-hurricane-irene

1. Keep rivers cool by preserving forested land along stream corridors in urban, suburban and rural areas.
2. Protect communities from flooding by preserving wetlands and natural areas in stream corridors, particularly in river headwaters.
3. Encourage water infiltration by minimizing new impervious surfaces and removing hard surfaces.
4. Support urban forestry.
5. Minimize river and stream channel erosion and sedimentation.
6. Encourage year-round water conservation and increase water use efficiency.
7. Upgrade culverts to minimize flooding and avoid catastrophic failure during storms.
8. Encourage carbon sequestration and flood resiliency through salt marsh and wetland restoration.

9. Support watershed-based planning for climate resiliency.
10. Build local support for smart growth and environmentally sensitive development.

Goal 7: Environmental Justice

Advocate for the health and safety of vulnerable populations that live near rivers or rely on them for their livelihood.

Along the Housatonic River, these signs warn people not to eat fish, frogs, turtles, and ducks because of PCB contamination.
Photo credit: Nancy Eve Cohen / NEPR. https://www.nepr.net

1. Notify residents, including non-English speakers, who depend on rivers for subsistence fishing or recreation when their local rivers are unsafe for fishing, swimming, or boating.
2. Advocate for affordable drinking water.
3. Ensure safe and enjoyable access to rivers for those in underserved communities.
4. Protect vulnerable populations in rural floodplains from the effects of intense storms.
5. Ensure that water pollution violations are vigorously prosecuted and eliminated in low-income communities and communities of color.
6. Ensure that noxious, pollution-producing facilities and their emissions/discharges/waste products are not sited near or shipped off to low-income areas of the state.
7. Encourage active involvement of affected EJ communities in decision-making about rivers in their communities.

Environmental Justice (EJ) is based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental hazards and to live in and enjoy a clean and healthful environment regardless of race, color, national origin, income, or English language proficiency. EJ populations are those segments of the population that EEA has determined to be most at risk of being unaware of or unable to participate in environmental decision-making or to gain access to state environmental resources, or are especially vulnerable.

Source: *Environmental Justice Policy of the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs*. January 31, 2017.

Our Role for River Protection

Advocate | **Educate** | **Collaborate**

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance has a critical role in helping protect Massachusetts' rivers. As the only statewide river advocacy organization, Mass Rivers:

- Advocates for adequate funding for state agencies and programs that protect rivers.
- Advocates for new legislation that would improve protection for rivers, public health, and climate resiliency.
- Opposes initiatives and legislation that would harm rivers.
- Works with other stakeholders to find creative solutions to difficult issues that affect rivers, including improving water infrastructure and reforming outdated water allocation rules.
- Works with the state and other stakeholders on policies and regulations to ensure our state's policies are the best in the nation.
- Advocates on Federal-level issues such as Wild and Scenic Rivers, EPA funding, and Clean Water Act policies.
- Leverages the power of its 77 member organizations for effective advocacy. Convenes, connects and strengthens member groups.
- Provides training and workshops on water topics for member groups.
- Uses social media and works with traditional media to raise awareness of river and water issues in Massachusetts and to promote solutions.
- Holds government agencies accountable for good water stewardship.
- Serves as a statewide resource for member groups, government agencies, legislators, media, and universities on rivers policy.

Building a Movement for Rivers: A Five-Year Plan

In the next five years, from 2019 through 2023, the following initiatives will be a priority for the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance. These initiatives will allow our growing organization to maximize its impact toward our Goals for Massachusetts Rivers. **Together we will:**

1. Continue to Be a Strong Voice for Rivers

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is recognized by legislators, government leaders, the media, academia, our colleagues, other stakeholders, funders, and the public as the statewide voice for Massachusetts rivers. We must maintain a strong presence wherever statewide river management discussions are held and decisions are made, including state advisory committees and commissions, legislative hearings, and task forces. We will continue to organize and work collaboratively with allies who share common goals. We will rely on up-to-date research and science to advocate effectively.

Actions:

1. Develop and maintain expertise in both traditional (e.g., stormwater, streamflow) and newer river issues (e.g., climate change resiliency). Serve as a resource for member organizations, government, media, academia, and the legislature.
2. Continue to organize annual ***Lobby for Rivers Day*** and legislative seminars and to host legislative and budget advocacy workshops for our member organizations.
3. Engage with federal legislators or their staff in person at least once a year on river issues.

Over thirty environmental organizations from across Massachusetts were represented in a conversation with Alex Dunn, former EPA New England Regional Administrator.

4. Work with stakeholder groups to develop and support better water policies.
5. Coordinate grassroots support for positive initiatives and opposition to bad ones.
6. Expand River Action Teams (RATs) to encourage member advocacy.
7. Contribute to policy-setting for the state's rivers through service on or participation in committees such as the Water Management Advisory Committee, the Water Infrastructure Finance Commission, the Water Resources Commission, and the Drought Management Task Force.

2. Strengthen the Movement by Leveling the Playing Field

Water is a highly regulated resource. Important decisions about how much water will be used over the next 20 years in a given watershed or how much pollution will be allowed in a river are often obscured by highly technical and confusing permit language and calculations. Citizen groups frequently fail to participate in the public processes around these permits and decisions because they don't understand the permitting process and schedules, or the permits themselves. They are thus at a great disadvantage against polluters or water users, both industries and municipalities, who can deploy lawyers and consultants to influence water management decisions. Adding a technical staff person with expertise to assist our member organizations in this important but often intimidating part of their work will level the playing field for citizen groups – and for the environment.

We have had repeated requests to assist our small- and medium-sized groups in building their capacity. With additional staff, we will also be able to do a better job of connecting our groups, creating mentoring opportunities for our member groups, creating relevant programming and trainings, and reaching out to new groups, to continue to grow the movement .

Actions:

1. Provide technical support to member groups to help them better understand and engage with regulatory programs such as the Water Management Act and Clean Water Act.
2. Help groups build capacity to work with municipalities to help them achieve mutual goals, such as compliance with stormwater requirements, creation of stormwater utilities, and river restoration such as culvert upgrades and dam removals by providing relevant training, support, and expertise.
3. Strengthen and connect the movement through meetings, workshops, seminars, and other events that educate members on issues and connect members to the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance and each other.
4. Help build our smaller members' organizational capacity.
5. Periodically survey the member organizations to help define priorities.
6. Work collaboratively with other organizations. Share credit for successes.

3. Increase Our Expertise and Spread the Knowledge

We are most effective in our advocacy when our recommendations are based on the most up to date scientific understandings, data, and research. Legislators, journalists, and members of the public count on us for the facts and for independent analysis of policies and programs. We are called on to answer detailed technical questions about Massachusetts' varied watersheds and best practices in other states. To provide this critical technical grounding, we rely on our knowledgeable staff, who work with outstanding volunteer experts, interns, and occasionally, paid consultants. The addition of a skilled researcher/analyst to our staff would increase our value as a resource to our member organizations and state decision-makers, helping lead to data-driven decision making.

Actions:

1. Continue to recruit interns and volunteers to assist with research and increase staff capacity.
2. Add a research assistant to increase our own capacity to assess statewide river health and program effectiveness, advocate effectively, build public awareness, and serve as a resource for our members, decision-makers, and others.
3. Have staff attend state and national conferences to stay current with science and policy.

4. Build Public Awareness and Engagement

Water is at or near the top of every survey of public environmental concerns, yet most people don't know where their water comes from, where it goes, or how to protect it. Without a better general understanding of basic water issues and solutions, efforts to protect our rivers will fail. Additional staff will enable us to develop social marketing campaigns and other strategies, in partnership with the state, municipalities, and our members, to encourage water conservation, and to build support for investment in water quality improvements and river restoration.

Actions:

1. Educate the public – in clear, understandable language – on river and water issues through traditional and social media.
2. Expand connections to media, including statewide, regional and local newspapers, radio, television, and online media to educate the public about river issues and solutions.

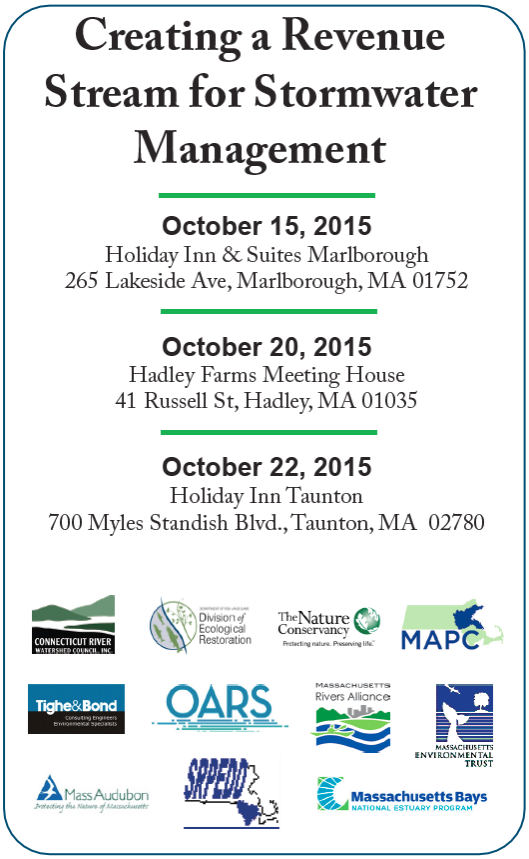
3. Identify at least one opportunity each year to host state-wide workshops to train municipal staff, their consultants and others on river topics.
4. Continue our semi-annual newsletter, The River Advocate.
5. Maintain a social media presence and look for new ways to build following and engage viewers.
6. Host events to draw in and educate new people – beer nights, speakers, site tours, annual meeting and dinner, house parties.

5. Be a Healthy, Nimble Nonprofit

Maintain the right mix and level of staff, board and funding to be able to respond quickly and effectively to evolving needs.

Actions:

1. Recruit and elect board members who bring a diversity of skills, talents, experience, who hail from all corners of the Commonwealth, and who are committed to helping the organization grow and thrive.
2. Periodically review and update bylaws, policies, and committee structures.
3. Hire and retain top talent. Invest in staff with the necessary specialized skills. Build a great organization culture. Hire a technical project manager, researcher/analyst, development director, and public outreach coordinator.
4. Keep the organization financially healthy by raising sufficient funds to meet current needs and anticipate future growth. Implement recommendations of development consultant to grow revenue in next 5 years. Involve all board and staff in development.
5. Build a healthy operating reserve to finance growth and withstand cash shortfalls.



Example of an Effective State-wide Workshop: Stormwater utilities have gained political support in recent years thanks in part to this Baystate Roads workshop series, developed and led by the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance. These workshops were well-attended by municipal staff and leadership.