



WSCAC/WAC/MWRA Advisory Board Meeting

Location: Held virtually
September 17, 2020 – 10:00 am

Members in Bold in Attendance:

Michael Baram, WSCAC Chair

Whitney Beals

William Copithorne, Town of Arlington

Steven Daunais, Tata & Howard

Andrea Donlon, CT River Conservancy

Gerald Eves, Trout Unlimited

Bill Fadden, OARS

Bill Kiley, BWSC

Paul Lauenstein, NepRWA

Martha Morgan, Nashua River Watershed

Martin Pillsbury, MAPC

Janet Rothrock, League of Women Voters

Bruce Spencer

Kurt Tramosch, Wayland Wells

Hosts and Presenters:

Joseph Favaloro, MWRA Advisory Board

Lou Taverna, MWRA Advisory Board

James Guiod, MWRA Advisory Board

Fred Laskey, MWRA

Dave Coppes, MWRA

Steve Rhode, MWRA

John Sanchez, MWRA

Non-Members in Attendance:

Lexi Dewey, WSCAC staff

Andreae Downs, WAC staff

Ace Peckham, WSCAC staff

MWRA Advisory Board Members

WAC Members

Lou Taverna, MWRA Advisory Board Chair, opened the meeting. Advisory Board meeting business was briefly conducted at the start of the meeting.

Lou introduced the first presenter, Dave Coppes, Chief Operating Officer at the MWRA, who shared information on the Quabbin Reservoir levels and the state's drought status (presentation [here](#)). Dave began by noting that the entire state is in a Level 2 Drought. The Quabbin is currently at 92.7% full, which is well above the "below normal" marker, and a bit above average. He noted that during the 2016-2017 drought, MWRA was able to supply water to outside communities, including Burlington and Ashland. Dave shared a graph showing Quabbin levels over several decades, including the drought of the 1960s. The graph noted the September 2020 water levels as a comparison, and Dave reminded attendees that water demand is significantly lower now than it was when the MWRA was created.

Dave discussed the emergency agreements with Ashland and Lynnfield Center Water District (neither of which has drawn MWRA water yet), as well as Burlington and Ashland, both of which are in the process of joining the MWRA. He noted that assuming the current drought persists, there may be more emergency requests for water,

but that levels remain high enough that this will be feasible. However, Dave reminded attendees that conservation messaging remains a priority.

In summary, Dave commented that the MWRA system is well-equipped to withstand drought, that the Quabbin and Wachusett reservoirs are currently nearly full and operating normally, and that no mandatory water restrictions have been required by the MWRA. Partially-supplied communities may have outdoor watering restrictions from MassDEP Water Management Act permits.

John Carroll pointed out that a key difference between the 1960s drought and today is that the demand is significantly lower. Joe Favaloro reminded attendees that regardless of how much water is drawn from the reservoir, an important question for the MWRA communities is what percentage each takes of the total demand.

Timothy McGovern asked why the demand is so much lower now, and Dave explained that there have been significant improvements in plumbing regulations including higher efficiency fixtures and appliances as well as industries using less water. MWRA communities are required to do leak detection which has reduced unaccounted for water. Fred Laskey noted that there is a strong financial incentive for companies and households to reduce their water use as well.

Dave was thanked for his presentation.

Steve Rhode, Director of the Department of Laboratory Services at the MWRA presented on the MWRA's work with the early warning pilot for the resurgence of COVID-19 with Biobot Analytics. His presentation is viewable [here](#). In April, as part of a research project, Biobot requested wastewater samples from 400 different utilities from different states to test for COVID levels. This research proved very useful as an early indicator of levels of infection in a community. The MWRA signed a contract with BioBot to have samples from Deer Island tested three times weekly, with extra samples included in the contract if needed. Steve noted that there are occasional reasons for faster turnaround results, so the Board has been asked to approve an extended contract (in which the MWRA would pay only for the submitted samples). This testing has revealed an increase in COVID cases in May, a low point in June, and a slow increase since then, although levels remain far lower than the initial spike that occurred in April and May. John Sullivan asked what the charge is per sample, and Steve answered that it is \$1,020 (a 15% discount due to the contract agreement).

Steve was thanked for his presentation.

Fred Laskey, Executive Director of the MWRA, presented on MWRA operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. This presentation is visible [here](#). On March 14, 2020, Governor Baker mandated that all agencies develop lists of "core functions". The MWRA senior staff created a plan to have employees telework where possible, and arranged standby rotations for maintenance crews. All critical personnel reported to work using CDC guidelines for safety.

Fred explained that the MWRA had prepared a Pandemic Response Plan in 2003 which included maintaining PPE stockpiles in good order. As a result, they were able to have enough PPE for staff and also donate 6,000 pieces to local hospital emergency rooms. People's safety is the first priority in this plan. Field crew and plant staff have staggered start times. Groups are mustered in remote locations with restrictions of one person per vehicle. In the case of multiple people in a car, barriers were installed for protection.

Contact tracing has been put into place, with a notification system in case anyone feels ill or tests positive. PPE and self-certification of good health is required at all times, and work and common areas are deep-cleaned by an

outside vendor. New procedures have been put into place for community staff to drop off water quality samples, contact-free. Construction sites received new safety measures as well, again following the Governor's mandates to have hand-washing stations, daily health certifications, and training.

Fred noted that routine maintenance dropped in the fourth quarter of FY20, which was unavoidable. The MWRA is still working to regain the lost ground, while ensuring safety for employees and the public.

Over 400 MWRA staff are teleworking, and all meetings and hiring processes are virtual. Protective barriers and signage have been installed in the offices for the limited visitors.

Future challenges are still numerous. The MWRA has received over 100 requests for assistance with family care (both child and adult), vacation time (many staff are not taking vacation time, so the hours are adding up; MWRA is considering a buyback program) staffing levels, training (some of which needs to be done in person), technology (some employees are using personal equipment; the MWRA plans to move to laptops for all staff with assigned docking stations), and future space needs (the Charlestown Navy Yard where the main MWRA office is located, has a lease which expires in 2023).

Joseph Foti asked if there is a limit on vacation time carryover, and Fred responded that staff can carry over 2 years' worth. Joe suggested extending the deadline to use the time, and Michele Gillen, the Director of Administration, noted many of the staff members were less than a week over their limit at the time of this meeting.

Fred closed by saying that the most important decisions to make at this time are how to invest in the needed technology for moving forward, and whether the MWRA should consider purchasing their headquarters instead of leasing. Fred also thanked Joe Favaloro for all his help in organizing the current system.

Joe Favaloro mentioned that the Advisory Board Committee has recommended the creation of a "new normal" committee to discuss and evaluate how the MWRA will move into the future.

David Manugian of the MWRA Advisory Board asked how the self-screening process was implemented. Fred explained that staff members filled out an initial form, and were expected to update with any changes. Additionally, staff are required to quarantine if they travel to specific states.

Fred was thanked for his presentation.

Joe Favaloro discussed the current vacancy levels at the DCR-DWSP. He shared a report on DCR staffing levels, noting that DWSP remains understaffed (they are budgeted and expected to have 150 full time employees; they currently have 132). The Advisory Board will continue to keep this issue front and center.

Andreae Downs, Executive Director of the Wastewater Advisory Committee gave a presentation called "Getting the Wipes Out". She noted that the main source of sewer clogs in 20 out of 32 MWRA sewer communities is caused by the flushing of wipes. The annual cost in 2019 for Massachusetts utilities for clearing blockages caused by wipes was \$9.75 million. The State of Washington has passed a law on wipes labeling, and California is close behind. WAC is building a coalition and working with legislators to pass a similar law in Massachusetts. As Andreae noted, hopefully once three states have passed legislation, national legislation should follow shortly.

Adriana Cillo of Boston Water and Sewer Commission commented that whenever she does a public education presentation, her audience is surprised by the problem of wipes because they had no idea that “flushable” wipes aren’t actually flushable.

Andreae was thanked for her presentation.

Lexi Dewey, Executive Director of the Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee, provided an update on WSCAC’s focus areas for this year. Monthly public meetings will include MWRA Risk and Resilience Assessments, Reservoir Operations, ongoing water system redundancy projects, updates on the Metro tunnel and DCR Watershed Operations.

Staff continues to attend Water Supply Protection Trust meetings to review DWSP programs and projects in the Annual Work Plan. Staff meet with foresters to review and tour lots for sale in the watersheds. Public access is a concern as the DCR Commissioner has put the recently completed Ware River Public Access Plan on hold. With all watersheds in high demand by the public for access during the pandemic, and violations on the rise, WSCAC is monitoring how rangers are addressing these issues.

WSCAC has a seat on the Drought Management Task Force and is actively involved in efforts to communicate with the public on the Level 2 statewide drought. There continues to be a lack of adequate messaging by the state to notify and share critical drought information with all cities and towns (excluding MWRA) in the state. This was also the case during the 2016 drought. Until this information is available to all, there cannot be a united effort to address the ongoing drought.

Lexi noted that the staffing issue at the DWSP continues to affect the ability of staff to accomplish essential tasks in the watersheds. Vacant positions include the Quabbin Aquatic Biologist, the Land Acquisitions Manager, the Forestry Administrator and labor/maintenance positions. The committee is monitoring this situation and stands ready to assist Advisory Board efforts and those of the Water Supply Protection Trust to resolve this critical issue.

Staff attends the Water Resources Committee meetings monthly to follow Interbasin Transfer requests to join the MWRA water system. Burlington and Ashland are currently moving through this process. WSCAC provides comments when applicable.

Lexi was thanked for her presentation.

Burlington DPW Director John Sanchez gave an update on recent Advisory Board Operations Committee business saying that Burlington and Ashland are in the process of joining the MWRA. More on this will be discussed at the November Advisory Board meeting. Joe Favaloro noted that Burlington is expected to be voted on in November, but the time frame for Ashland is less determined. Joe also commented that Lynnfield Center Water District, which has an emergency water supply agreement for six months’ time, has not yet taken any water, but that they are not expected to take more than 0.144 million gallons.

The Advisory Board completed their administrative business, and the meeting was adjourned.