

Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting
Thursday, November 7th, 2019
7:00 PM

Location: Rutland Free Public Library, 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543

Members: (Members in **BOLD** were present)

Massachusetts Council of Sportsmen: William Lebel

Alternate: Mike Moss

Worcester County League of Sportsmen's Clubs: John Root

Alternate: Dave Papale

Trout Unlimited: **Jeffrey Schaaf (chairperson)**

Alternate:

A Rod and Gun Club: Joe Cataldo

Alternate: Bryan Waterman

Barre Selectboard: Martha Varnot

Alternate: **Edward Yaglou**

Hubbardston Selectboard:

Alternate: **Cindy Schlener**

Oakham Selectboard: Thomas Hughes

Alternate: **Phillip Warbasse**

Rutland Selectboard: **Charles R. Williams**

Alternate: **Brett Russ**

Barre Historical Society: Margo Petracone

Alternate:

Hubbardston Historical Society: Robin Langer

Alternate:

Oakham Historical Society: **Bill Mucha**

Alternate: **Lee Dougan**

Rutland Historical Society:

Alternate:

Massachusetts Wildlife Federation: (group disbanded)

Alternate:

Massachusetts Audubon Society: **Martha Gach**

Alternate:

Sierra Club: **Matt Hopkinson**

Alternate:

Upper Ware River Watershed Association: (group disbanded)

Alternate:

General Public: Mark DuBois

Alternate: **Dave Small**

DCR Staff Present:

Dan Clark, Sara Cohen, Justin Gonsor, Lisa Gustavsen, John Scannell

Members of the Public Present:

Lydia Barter, Leslie Choquette, Lexi Dewey, Dick Hutchings, Kathleen James, Paul Kreswick, Colleen Melanson, Nancy Monson, Chris Palin, Andrew Pettyjohn, Mike Priffi, Steve Salvadore, Rich Sanborn, Brian Trimby, Elsie Uffelmann, Phillip Warbasse, Marianne Wojcicki, Dean Zuppio

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Start Time: 7:11 PM

Approval of minutes from meeting on Thursday, September 12th, 2019

Dick Williams made a motion to accept the minutes from the Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee (WRWAC) meeting on September 12th, 2019. Cindy Schlener seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

Brief review by DCR of where we are in the plan update process

John Scannell briefed everyone on how the update process for the Ware River public access plan has progressed.

DCR first put together a document of watershed management principles so that everyone could see how public access is viewed through that set of guidelines. A public engagement plan was also clearly laid out. Since the spring, DCR has been meeting with stakeholder groups as specified at past WRWAC meetings. Potential access issues were brought up, identified, and solutions solicited, at those meetings. It has been a collaborative effort to make sure the watershed would still be protected and to continue to provide public access.

Review by facilitator of collaborative stakeholder engagement to date

Sara Cohen updated everyone on the stakeholder engagement process up to the current time.

The process of updating the public access plan began at a WRWAC meeting back in April of 2018. Over 100 people attended the meeting. During the issue identification phase DCR held office hours to meet with anyone interested. A user survey was distributed that got over 900 responses. During this time DCR met with town police departments, MWRA, Army Corps, and other federal and state agencies that manage land in the watershed. Goals of the plan update were then presented to WRWAC in June. During the problem-solving phase, specified user groups selected a representative from their constituency to meet with DCR in small, working sessions. Five horseback riding groups were represented, two mountain biking groups, four snowmobile groups, one hunting/fishing group and the agency that regulates hunting and fishing (DFG), and the Asnacomet Pond Association.

Presentation by DCR of draft plan components, including management objectives, policy and operational changes, and maps

Dan Clark presented the proposed changes to the Ware River Public Access Management Plan (WRPAMP).

From a watershed protection standpoint, a main goal is to protect the most critical resource first. This area for DCR is the Ware River intake. The goal is to first update signage and increase awareness regarding the existing 17-acre exclusion zone around the intake where no public access is allowed, apart from some pedestrian access.

A new 1-km buffer zone (483 acres) is proposed around the intake that will allow pedestrian access only, with the following exceptions:

- Route 122
- MA Central Rail Trail (posting increased signage to keep users on the trail)
- Snowmobile trail – rerouted out of the central part of the buffer zone, but clips the southwest and northwest corner of the zone for necessary connectivity
- Other non-pedestrian access through the buffer zone for individual organized events allowable by written permission from DCR

Dogs will not be allowed in the buffer zone. The parking lot in the buffer zone on Rt. 122 is set to be replaced with a new parking lot off Granger Road and then closed and restored to natural area. A replacement for the existing car-top canoe and kayak launch site at the former Rt. 122 parking lot is planned to be provided at the end of Covered Bridge Road. This buffer zone should help to limit activity in the area.

A new policy is being proposed for DCR roads in the watershed. All DCR internal roads will be closed to unauthorized vehicle traffic from January through September. The gates will be closed and locked. Some DCR gates will be unlocked and open from October through December each year to accommodate permitted hunters. Roads may be closed to all users at any time of the year for all activities, because of road conditions or operational needs, such as timber harvesting, road maintenance, etc. Closures will be communicated as soon as practicable on DCR's website and app, through signage, and electronically to the WRWAC. This policy should improve watershed protection. In the past, these roads and gates remained open to vehicles throughout most of the year, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is in stark contrast to how the rest of DCR properties, watersheds, and other state agencies are managed.

A new policy regarding hours when the property is open to the public is being proposed. DCR watershed lands will be open for public access from one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset. The property has previously been open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This will make Ware River policy more consistent with other DCR water supply properties.

Changes are also proposed for the trail system in the watershed. The goal is to shift towards a network of predominantly multi-use trails. Proposed trail networks were refined collaboratively with user groups to support recreation that is compatible with the following watershed management goals:

- Avoid the intake buffer zone and riparian buffers
- Use best management practices for stream crossings (e.g. bridges, culverts)
- Avoid leading to or crossing private property
- Emphasize connectivity rather than concentrated use
- Reduce redundancy

Clear signage will be installed throughout the network. Maps will be published for each recreation type and posted online and at kiosks throughout the

watershed. A mobile trail app that would give users real time information regarding where they are in the watershed and which uses are allowed is in development. All unauthorized trails will be closed and allowed to restore back to natural habitat. There is a goal to work with friends' groups to accomplish the following:

- Maintain the authorized trail network
- Respect the closure of unauthorized trails
- Help with messaging and self-policing within their membership groups

Regarding horse trails specifically, a small section that went along the rail trail will be eliminated, thus making horses not allowed anywhere on the MA Central Rail Trail in the watershed. Essentially, most existing horse trails were retained. In the previous plan, bicycles were limited to riding on roads and not allowed on trails. For the updated plan, DCR has agreed to a limited number of off-road, single-track trails for mountain biking. Some stream crossings will need to be addressed before some of these trails become official. The full mid-state trail will be opened to bicycles. There is one trail designated for pedestrians only that is located around Muddy Pond. For snowmobile trails, major north-south and east-west connections were maintained. Some of the proposed trails clip the buffer zone; the current trails go through the middle of the zone. The updated plan will feature a set of approved snowmobile trails, the previous plan simply had a 'snowmobile zone' where they were allowed. This should result in regulations being easier to understand and enforce.

There is a new leash policy for dogs set to be implemented. Dogs must be leashed on a 6' or shorter leash at all times on DCR property. An exception will allow for licensed hunters to have their dog off leash while hunting or training. This policy is consistent with MasWildlife and other state agencies.

Some of the policies regarding watershed lakes and ponds are set to be updated. For Long Pond, large motor permits (over 25hp for 4-stroke engines and 20hp for 2-stroke engines) permits will be discontinued. The policy to allow those large motor permits originated as a pilot program many years ago but was never evaluated. This change will make Long Pond regulations consistent with other watershed lakes and ponds. There is also a set of revised access policies for Comet Pond being proposed:

- A “distance swimming” access point will be created near the dam, away from the boat ramp. Rules, restrictions, and swimmer self-assessment guidelines will be posted.
- Signs will redirect people to the public beach for family swimming and shoreline recreation.
- Signage will emphasize a prohibition of beaching boats along the pond shoreline.
- Enforcement of all policies and rules will be increased and boaters will be spot checked for mandatory self-certification of off-site removal of invasive species.
- More public information will be posted online about Comet Pond, including hours, available resources, rules, etc.
- Application of large motor regulations at Comet Pond is under review.

The Access Plan update will also clarify that DCR regulations prohibit paddleboards on all watershed-controlled ponds.

Various other procedural updates are being proposed. They are as follows:

- DCR will provide 24-hour notice to the WRWAC, when possible, for temporary closures of trails, roads, etc.
- Significant issues or ongoing problems will be brought to the WRWAC before final decisions are made.
- DCR will rely on user groups to reinforce rules.
- DCR reserves the right to become more restrictive if access issues cannot be resolved.
- The Access Plan will articulate a process to review and consider trail changes prior to the next Plan update (2029).

Discussion to address questions, solicit committee feedback, and identify any crucial outstanding concerns

Dick Williams expressed appreciation regarding the proposed changes at Long Pond. He asked about potentially adding an additional parking area near Comet Pond. John Scannell answered that public usage/traffic in the area can be monitored to determine if a new parking area is warranted.

Cindy Schlener suggested using Facebook to help notify the general public of road/trail closures in addition to posting on the main DCR webpage. Matt Hopkinson agreed, and cited the Barre Falls Dam Facebook page as a good

example. John Scannell agreed but also acknowledged that the state doesn't currently have an official Facebook account and that certain parameters need to be followed regarding social media.

Cindy stated that the kayak/canoe drop-off near Covered Bridge road would increase traffic on the dirt road. She suggested gates be installed off the railroad bed to prevent cars from using it as a parking area and to keep people on the public road. Multiple people expressed concern over the proposed kayak/canoe launch. A member of the public asked if any other potential canoe launch sites were investigated. Dan Clark answered that a couple other spots were looked at but didn't seem appropriate. Suggestions for additional locations can still be submitted.

Cindy asked that her driveway be taken off the map. It is currently listed as a trail.

Cindy expressed appreciation for the distance swimming access at Comet Pond. She asked why paddle boarding is not allowed there. John Scannell answered that it isn't a rule change, but a clarification. The existing regulation states, 'no boating unless designated,' and paddle boarding was never considered to be, 'boating.' It also creates consistency on the policy across the agency.

Matt Hopkinson commented that closing the roads in winter would add increased access for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. He asked if the roads would be plowed, and if so, could real-time notification happen. Dan Clark answered that certain roads may be plowed dependent upon need. There are plans to develop and release a 'trails app' that should be able to have road information included.

Matt expressed concern over the proposed closing of watershed lands one hour after sunset. He asked if it would be possible to get pedestrian access allowed later into the evening. Multiple people commented that they enjoy using the property after work but would not be allowed access under the new policy during times of year when sunset occurs earlier in the day. Brett Russ also expressed concern over access being limited to one hour after sunset and suggested a potential permit system to allow people access later into the night. Multiple people advocated for a 9pm closing time of watershed lands instead of one hour after sunset.

A member of the public asked if Coldbrook Road would be one of the internal roads closed January through September; he wanted it kept open. Dan Clark answered that it would be closed.

Jeff Schaaf asked about the buffer zone and how DCR intends to keep people out of it, specifically the canoe launch and Rt. 122 parking area. John Scannell clarified that pedestrian access in that area will still be allowed, but the parking area will be closed. Jeff asked for more information on the planned improvements for canoe access. Dan Clark answered that there is recognition of a need to improve the site, but a specific assessment and determination still needs to be done.

Brett Russ expressed desire for a way to connect the two rail trails in the area for bicycles.

Brett voiced concern over snowmobiles using single-track trails and those trails getting widened from the winter usage.

A member of the public asked if there was any way to keep the Rt. 122 parking lot open. John Scannell answered that it is non-negotiable as it is currently in the proposed buffer zone, which represents a minimum level of protection that is needed.

A member of the public asked for information regarding the drawdown of the Ware River that happens annually each summer. John Scannell answered that it is usually done for maintenance at the intake as well as invasive species management/removal in the area.

Cindy Schlener asked if retractable leashes that extend past 6 ft. would be allowed. John Scannell answered that 6 ft. would be the limit, regardless of leash style. There was discussion on the merits of a 6 ft. limit.

A member of the public asked if a 'friend's group' was formed with the proper paperwork, could they help with trail maintenance and notifications of closures. John Scannell thought it would be a good idea. Cindy Schlener, as a first step, talked about getting a list of names started of people interested. There was discussion on the protocol and process of officially forming the group.

A member of the public asked if the proposed gate closures would affect turkey hunting. John Scannell clarified that the gates will be locked January-September, but pedestrian access/hunting will still be allowed.

Cindy Schlener suggested increasing the parking area located off Intervale Road near the prison camp.

A member of the public stated that allowing swimming at Comet Pond, but not paddle boarding, seems illogical. Multiple people felt that paddle boarding at Comet Pond should be allowed.

A member of the public expressed concern over the proposed long-distance swimming access point location at the south end of Comet Pond, which is near the boat ramp and also where people fish. She would rather begin from the beach. John Scannell answered that the beach is managed by DCR's MassParks division and they don't allow distance swimming, except at Walden Pond. The beach at Comet Pond is roped in.

A member of the public asked if MassWildlife would still be able to stock fish in the Ware River if the parking area on Rt. 122 is removed. John Scannell answered that DCR will work with MassWildlife to accommodate their stocking.

There was discussion about the merits of removing brush at the north end of the Comet Pond dam for the newly proposed "distance swimming access point" at to create a spot that provided easier/safer access but still allowed visibility from the parking lot.

Determination of next steps

John Scannell talked about the next steps going forward in the process of updating the Ware River Public Access Plan.

The plan is currently being written and the goal is to have a draft version available to the public by the end of the year. A public hearing will then happen and is required. A 30-day comment period will follow that hearing. An exact date for plan finalization is not yet known.

Member Issues

A member of the public asked about the newly installed bridges in the watershed and if they would eventually be open to the public. One is located off Brigham Road and another near Twin Hill. Dan Clark answered that they will remain closed until a long-term access policy is agreed upon.

Dick Williams made everyone aware of Massachusetts Bill H.897 which proposes banning forestry in Massachusetts on public lands.

Meeting End Time: 9:13 PM

Upcoming WRWAC Meetings

- Thursday, January 16th, 2020 at 7 PM – Rutland Free Public Library (downstairs), 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543