

Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting
Thursday, January 20th, 2022
7:00 PM

Location: online via Zoom and YouTube

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:

Alternate: Bryan Waterman

Barre Selectboard: Martha Varnot

Alternate: **Mike Wood**

Hubbardston Selectboard: **Cindy Schlener**

Alternate: **Dave Marsh**

Oakham Selectboard: Thomas Hughes

Alternate: Phillip Warbasse

Rutland Selectboard: **Charles R. Williams**

Alternate:

Barre Historical Society: **Dave Flick**

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: **Brett Russ**

DCR Staff Present:

Ken Canfield, Dan Clark, Herm Eck, Justin Gonsor, Lisa Gustavsen, Jenna Perschka, John Scannell

Members of the Public Present:

Lexi Dewey, Wilson Dobson, Mark Fateux, Lynnette Goodnow, Dennis Guberski, Bob Hatch, Jody Kablack, Mark Kablack, Robert Kane, Russell LaRoche, Joy Larrabee, Heather Munroe, Bob Olson, Margo Petracone, Mike Prifti, Rusty Savignac, Jeremy Tobin, Brian Trimby, Michele Van Reet, Marianne Wojcicki, Jonathan Wright, Dean Zuppio

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Start Time: 7:02 PM

Approval of minutes from meeting on Thursday, July 8th, 2021

Dick Williams made a motion to accept the minutes from the Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee (WRWAC) meeting on July 8th, 2021. Mike Wood seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

Recent safety measures taken at the Prison Camp - DCR

Dan Clark updated the committee on recent initiatives at DCR to identify sites that pose a potential public safety risk. The prison camp is on that list of sites. The first step has been to go out post signage to alert the public to potential hazards. Signs have been put up in front of the root cellar and snow fencing/signage erected around the ‘basement’ area.

Brett asked about future phases of the initiative. Dan answered that DCR is in the process of hiring structural engineers to do an assessment of the area and identify the current conditions of the structures and any potential upcoming problems that could arise.

Future cleanup and maintenance of the site was discussed.

Jeff Stillings for the Rutland Historical Commission and discussion about the Prison Camp structures

Jeff updated the recapped preservation preparations for the prison camp ruins since the last WRWAC meeting. Senator Gobi and representative Ferguson were able to

secure \$50,000 in state funds for use in preservation of the prison camp ruins. The Rutland Historical Commission has been granted oversight of the project with full partnership and cooperation with DCR. They are open to ideas from WRWAC or the public on how to best use the funds. The grant expires in June; therefore, the commission is looking to spend the money before that date.

The Historical Commission hosted a public tour of the ruins a couple months back. Important goals in preserving the ruins that they have identified are as follows:

- Address safety issues
- Install informational kiosks for public education
- Install additional signage and historical photos for public viewing
- Install signage with QR code links
- Wood directional arrows to direct public around the site
- Grade/level off the parking lot to make it flat
- Clearing brush and other vegetation overgrowth around site
- Signage with link to town administered historical commission web page

The Historical Commission recently met with DCR to discuss the above topics and are in general agreement. DCR has offered their services and support where possible.

There was discussion on possibly creating a new parking area in a different location or simply improving the existing lot.

John Root commented that he feels preserving the prison camp ruins is of the utmost importance.

Maintenance of the prison camp cemetery was discussed.

Michael Wood commented on his concern of overlapping usage and activities in the area. Specifically, he mentioned that MassWildlife stocks the area for pheasant hunting, and the land is hunted for other upland game birds. He hopes the mowing schedule can be done in a way that won't disrupt the birds. He suggested DCR add signage alerting the public that active bird hunting happens in the area. The hope is that all the various activities allowed in the area can coexist successfully. Dan Clark commented that MassWildlife has wildlife management areas within the watershed. Those areas are under a MOU (memorandum of understanding) with DCR that delineates the areas and what hunting can take place on them.

Michele Van Reet commented that she uses the property frequently, and in her experience, has seen a peaceful coexistence between different user groups.

Update on the controlled burn at the Barre Heath

Ken Canfield updated the committee on recent DCR-DWSP forestry projects. All the forestry operations are part of the larger land management plan and have the strategy of keeping watershed lands as diverse as possible, resilient, and a successful filter for the water.

The prescribed burn happened in Barre on April 3, 2021. 26 acres were successfully burned. It was a multi-agency effort between DCR Fire Control and DWSP, MassWildlife, Nation Park Service, Barre FD, West Brookfield FD, Sterling FD, and Groton FD. The site is extremely well drained, sandy, and nutrient poor. It was the first prescribed burn on water supply land in over 20 years.

Preparations for the project took place over multiple years and included the following:

- Two commercial timber harvest happened prior to the burn
- Contract mowing of vegetation
- Preparation and creation of a burn plan
- DCR staff mowed brush to establish and maintain fire breaks

For follow up, more contract mowing will happen in the spring. Another prescribed burn is planned for this area as well as others.

Discussion about logging project in Oakham

Ken updated the committee on the slashwall harvest that happened in Oakham north of Turnpike Road. It is part of a regional study on how to control deer herbivory, in particular, but also moose herbivory. On lands where the deer population is too large it can be difficult to regenerate the mix of tree species that is desired. Fencing can be used to keep deer out of an area, but this study involves using a natural slashwall. It is the first of its kind in Massachusetts.

14-acre clear cuts were done, one with a slashwall around it and one without. The slashwall is made of logging debris and is roughly 10' tall and 12' wide. The 14-acre perimeter consists of about a mile of wall and 1,400 tons of woody material in the wall.

The slashwall is believed to be a cost-effective way to control herbivory. It is cheaper to install than fencing, little to no maintenance, should last 10 years, provide habitat for wildlife. Also, carbon is released slowly, and the wall utilizes low-grade material. Ken showed photos of evidence of all types of small mammals inside the wall except for deer or moose, so it appears to be doing its job.

The site is part of a larger research study being conducted by Dr. Jeff Ward with the Department of Forestry and Horticulture, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. Overall, the study has 20 vegetation plots.

Jeff Schaaf asked about what happens to the slash wall after 10 years. Ken answered that it be allowed to naturally deteriorate and decompose.

Discussion about field mowing

Ken Canfield updated the committee on the status of field habitat in the WRW.

There are currently approximately 232 acres of fields in the watershed (roughly 1% of the watershed). Those fields are a mix of permitted hay fields, brush fields mowed annually, and brush fields mowed semi-annually. There are approximately 120 acres of the permitted hay fields, but Prison Camp fields (approximately 35 acres) are not currently under permit. DWSP staff mowed approximately 160 acres in 2021. DCR is investigating prescribed burning as a management option for fields in the future.

Cindy Schlener asked for details on the duration of the haying permits. Ken answered that the field permits run for 5 years.

Dick Williams and Dave Flick expressed appreciation for all the recent forestry projects as well as the transparency of the operations.

Dean Zuppio asked if forestry projects would impact snowmobiling for the upcoming season. Ken answered that he didn't believe snowmobiling would be impacted.

Discussion about the Whitehall Pond Dam

Dick Williams expressed concern about the current condition of the Whitehall Pond Dam and the potential for it to fail. Dan commented that the dam in question is managed by DCR-State Parks and not DCR-DWSP. Dan reached out to DCR's Office of Dam Safety and was told that the Whitehall Pond Dam was inspected on March 20, 2019 and was reported to be in an overall fair condition. The dam is on a 5-year inspection frequency, with the next inspection scheduled for March 20, 2024.

Discussion about trails and the formation of a subcommittee concerned specifically with trails

There is desire to form a subgroup within WRWAC to deal specifically with trail related issues. Main goals of this subcommittee would be to continue to improve the trail situation in the watershed, help to get to the end of updating Ware River's Public Access Management Plan, resolve DCR trail concerns going forward, and coordinate efforts within user groups.

The merits of creating a trails subcommittee were discussed.

Cindy Schlener made a motion to create a subcommittee within the WRWAC that deals specifically with trail related issues. Dave Flick seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

Mark Kablack asked about the timeline for the coming months and when the public comment period will begin for the access plan update. He also asked about the ability of someone from the public to participate in the trail subcommittee. John Scannell answered that updating the plan has been on hold since the covid pandemic began and that DCR has a new acting commissioner as of last fall. The hope is to restart the public input process later this spring. Anyone looking to be part of the subcommittee or contribute should send an email to Cindy Schlener. To request Cindy's email, get in touch with Justin Gonsor at justin.gonsor@mass.gov.

There was discussion between the difference between forest roads and trails throughout the watershed as well as the various rail trails.

Discussion about how the WRWAC can take the lead on unresolved watershed issues

Dan Clark commented that there is a process for an organized group to do work or volunteer to do work in the watershed. It works best and is easiest for a single entity to make a submission to DCR on behalf of all user groups. Brett asked if it would be possible for DCR to formally recognize the WRWAC trails subcommittee as an entity for volunteer stewardship purposes. Dan answered that it is possible. He detailed to process for submitting a proposal in the future.

Boating access on Long Pond was discussed. Long Pond permits will be given out the same as in years past. The application is now online and will be posted in the coming months.

Rusty Savignac asked about possibly forming a subcommittee of WRWAC that would focus on all water access point related issues in the watershed.

Michael Wood asked about the possibility of forming a subcommittee focused on hunting related issues on the watershed.

Jeff Schaaf liked the idea of forming the separate subcommittees. This discussion will be continued at the next meeting and be on the agenda.

Member Issues

Dick Williams asked about new boat ramps at Long Pond. John Scannell clarified that the new ramp that is currently in place at Long Pond was built by the Office of Fishing and Boating Access. They are proposed an improvement/redesign of that ramp.

Meeting End Time: 8:52 PM

Upcoming WRWAC Meetings

- Thursday, March 10th, 2022, at 7 PM – online via Zoom and YouTube