

**Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting**  
**Thursday, January 29, 2026**  
**7:00 PM**

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

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

Massachusetts Council of Sportsmen: **Laurie Pray**

Alternate: Mike Moss

Worcester County League of Sportsmen's Clubs: **Steve LaRivee**

Alternate: John Root

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

Alternate:

A Rod and Gun Club: Vincent Kotowski

Alternate: **Dennis Guberski**

Barre Selectboard: **Mike Wood (vice chairperson)**

Alternate:

Hubbardston Selectboard: **Cindy Schlener**

Alternate: Dave Marsh

Oakham Selectboard: **Thomas Hughes**

Alternate: Phillip Warbasse

Rutland Selectboard: Darren Ross

Alternate:

Barre Historical Society: Dave Flick

Alternate: **Margo Petracone**

Hubbardston Historical Society: Robin Langer

Alternate:

Oakham Historical Society: **Andrew Noone**

Alternate: **Lee Dougan**

Rutland Historical Society: **Eric Van Reet**

Alternate:

Massachusetts Audubon Society: Martha Gach

Alternate:

Sierra Club: Matt Hopkinson

Alternate:

General Public: Mark DuBois

Alternate: **Brett Russ**

**DCR Staff Present:** Dan Clark, Justin Gonsor, John Scannell

**Members of the Public Present:** Sean Blood, Leslie Choquette, Paul Kreswick, Dave Morin, Duane Pray, Rusty Savignac

## **Meeting Minutes**

**Meeting Start Time: 7:00 PM**

### **Approval of minutes from meeting on November 20, 2025**

Tom Hughes made a motion to accept the minutes from the Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee (WRWAC) meeting on November 20, 2025. Dennis Guberski seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

### **DCR response to the biennial review request to partially reopening Prison Camp Road to vehicular traffic during turkey hunting season**

Dan Clark presented WRWAC with a written response letter from DCR regarding their two requested changes to the existing Public Access Management Plan related to public vehicle access to DCR's internal roads. The following is a summary of that letter's response to the first request:

DCR reviewed and discussed these proposed changes and carefully scrutinized the justifications that were provided and made the following decisions.

### **Background**

When DCR began the process of updating the Ware River Public Access Management Plan in 2019, it released a list of priority goals and associated changes to public access that would be needed to accomplish these goals. Most of these goals were focused on enhancing watershed protection while still maintaining recreational access to DCR property. One of DCR's main goals was reducing the number of roads/miles open to public vehicles to more closely align with existing policies on other state lands (MassWildlife, DCR State Parks), other DCR watersheds (Quabbin, Wachusett) and other large landowners (Mass Audubon, Trustees, etc.). Historically, the number of roads (and amount of time) that were open in the Ware River watershed to unrestricted public vehicles was extraordinary and was in sharp contrast to other agencies that completely prohibited vehicle access.

DCR's initial proposal closed all DCR roads to public vehicles from January-September and only opened roads to license hunters during October-December. After several discussions with various user groups, DCR withdrew its original proposal and conceded keeping a set of roads open most of the year to all vehicles, while continuing to allow access to a larger network of roads to licensed hunters in the fall. The current road network was determined based on DCR's desire to significantly reduce vehicle access while accommodating access to specific locations for justifiable reasons.

Since the completion of the Ware River Public Access Management Plan in 2023, the WRWAC has made numerous requests for additional roads to be open to public vehicles. In response to these requests, DCR released a summary of the impacts roads can have in a watershed (Public Vehicle Road Access on DCR Watershed Management Lands in the Ware River: Response to WRWAC Requests to reopen roads (April 2025) and copies were given to WRWAC members. Given DCR's original goal, any requests to change the current vehicle road network must be accompanied by compelling justification and documentation that there will be no impacts to watershed protection.

## **Requests**

1. Open Prison Camp Road to hunters in authorized vehicles south from Prison Camps to Whitehall Road during the spring turkey season.
  - o Contained within this request were three justifications:
    - i. Additional turkey hunting will put pressure on deer and result in lower deer densities.
    - ii. Turkey hunting could recruit new youth hunters.
    - iii. Turkeys carry a variety of pathogens that can spread to humans and other animals.

There are no examples in the published literature that indicate harvesting more turkeys will result in lower deer densities. The list of references provided to DCR by WRWAC was an AI generated summary of generalizations and contained no published articles.

In general, DCR is supportive of recruiting new generations of hunters, and DCR provides a variety of hunting opportunities, including pheasant hunting. Pheasant hunting is often cited as an introduction or gateway for recruiting young hunters. However, it is no DCR's mission or mandate to

maximize hunting opportunities; this is more aligned with MassWildlife's mission. It should be noted that the area south of Prison Camps is already open to spring turkey hunters. Providing vehicle access to this same area will unlikely impact hunter recruitment.

Turkeys carry no more/less diseases than other common wildlife found in the Ware River watershed, and their densities are not a significant factor in DCR's watershed protection plan. As clearly outlined in DCR's summary on roads: Public Vehicle Road Access on DCR Watershed Management Lands in the Ware River: Response to WRWAC request to reopen roads (April 2025) every additional mile of road open to vehicles can result in a variety of negative impacts. Therefore, DCR is extremely conservative when reviewing requests involving changes to the road network that would result in added mileage being open. None of the justifications provided by WRWAC include additional information not already considered when the initial Ware River Watershed Public Access Management Plan was completed. Therefore, this requested change will not be made.

Dennis stated that the potential for turkeys to spread pathogens is a concern.

### **DCR response to request to open all hunting roads a week before the fall bear season**

Dan Clark presented WRWAC with a written response letter from DCR regarding their two requested changes to the existing Public Access Management Plan related to public vehicle access to DCR's internal roads. The following is a summary of that letter's response to the second request:

### **Requests**

2. Open all hunting gates to authorized vehicles one week before the beginning of September bear season.
  - Contained within this request was one justification:
    - i. The bear population has expanded and opening the roads will help reduce the bear population.

The MA Division of Fisheries and Wildlife is responsible for managing the state's bear population. DFG has not expressed any concerns to DCR about increasing harvests or requested that DCR provide more access to bear hunters.

This request would result in a substantial number of roads being open to authorized vehicles starting in August each year, resulting in an extra month of open roads at a time when overall visitor usage is high. Rutland State Park is still open and operating during this time, and it is likely that a substantial increase in unauthorized vehicles on DCR roads would result, leading to more enforcement issues for Watershed Rangers.

As indicated in request 1, DCR is reluctant to make changes to its road network which increases mileage or extended seasons without substantial justification. The justification provided by WRWAC is not enough to modify the road network, and this requested change will not be made.

Steve LaRivee commented that he recently spoke with MassWildlife bear biologist Dave Wattles about the increasing bear population across the state. He requested that Dan contact Dave to get his input regarding the bear population in the watershed and potentially increasing hunter access during the bear season. Mike Wood read from MassWildlife's website which states that the 2026 bear season runs September 7 through December 12. There is also a proposal to expand the season due to the growing bear population in the state. Mike also asked if DCR would reconsider the request after speaking with the MassWildlife biologist. Dan answered that he would report back to the committee after speaking with Dave.

The extent of illegal activity and unauthorized vehicles in the watershed was discussed. There are currently three rangers stationed in the Ware River watershed. It was noted that the rangers do not have law enforcement capabilities and only can issue parking tickets. Fees taken in from parking tickets are deposited in the state's general fund. Coordinating and collaborating with local watershed town police departments to curtail illegal activities was suggested.

A member of the public asked how people are supposed to know which roads can be driven on 'by permit only'. Dan answered that adequate signage has been posted on all watershed roads that require a permit to be used by the public.

### **Discussion regarding work on Prison Camp structures**

Various WRWAC members had heard there is upcoming work scheduled for the Prison Camp area and asked Dan for more information.

Dan reminded everyone that DCR has deemed the prison cells and root cellar as unsafe structures. There was an initial proposal to demolish both structures. The Rutland Historical Commission was able to secure a grant to install gates and grates that would keep people from going inside the structures. Those gates and grates were subsequently vandalized and tore out and the effort failed. DCR is currently proposing to demolish the prison cell structure and block off the root cellar. This proposal was presented to the Rutland Historical Commission, and they asked for some time to come up with an alternative plan. DCR is currently awaiting their proposal.

Cindy suggested installing a more permanent gate structure in front of the structures that couldn't be ripped out as easily.

The continuous graffiti, vandalism, and hate speech at the Prison Camp area was discussed. Multiple people suggested getting local police departments involved and getting multiple high-quality cameras installed.

A representative of the Rutland Historical Commission mentioned that they have started a 'save our structures' campaign and are opposed to any structures being demolished. They believe the gates became a target of vandalism due to them being an 'attractive nuisance'. She mentioned that the Commission has a supply of paint left over the grant and is willing to give it to DCR to help paint over any graffiti that appears on site. She also mentioned that the public enjoy going inside the structures. Dan reminded everyone that DCR has deemed both the root cellar and prison cells as structurally unsound.

### **Update on approval/recognition of change in delegate status for Worcester County League of Sportsmen, Oakham Historical Society, and General Public**

Jeff Schaaf updated everyone on some recent changes in delegate status for a few of the organizations represented on WRWAC.

John Root has resigned from the committee and Steve LaRivee is now the primary representative for the Worcester County League of Sportsmen. The DCR commissioner has made this appointment.

Bill Mucha has resigned from the committee and Andrew Noone has now been appointed by the Commissioner as the primary representative for the Oakham Historical Society.

Brett Russ is currently the alternate representative for the general public but is looking to move to become the primary representative. Mark DuBois is the current primary representative but rarely attends meetings. Jeff will draft a letter to DCR on behalf of the committee requesting appointment of Brett to the primary role.

### **Member Issues**

Steve LaRivee asked that a finalized definition for DWSP-managed reserve lands, and what activities would be allowed on reserve lands, get completed soon. John Scannell clarified that back in 2012 DCR-State Parks split all their lands into three designations (parkland, woodland, reserve). Their definitions do not currently apply to DWSP managed lands. Although, DWSP is working with EEA on the process of designating some of their land as reserves and finalizing a definition and guidance language on what activities will be allowed on these lands. DWSP will report back to the committee when that language is finalized.

Mike Wood asked if DCR has a response to WRWAC's trails subcommittee requests that were submitted at the last meeting. Dan answered that there were four official requests and that DCR is currently working through them with the trail's subcommittee. Site visits are required to evaluate some of the requests. A written response to the committee will be forthcoming.

### **New Business**

N/A

**Meeting End Time: 7:47 PM**

### **Upcoming WRWAC Meetings**

- Thursday, April 2, 2026, 7PM: Rutland Public Library, 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543 (downstairs; large meeting room)