

Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting
Thursday, February 29, 2024
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: **John Root**

Alternate: Dave Papale

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: **Bill Mucha**

Alternate: **Lee Dougan**

Rutland Historical Society:

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: Jane Dewey, Eric Goodhart, Jane Greenleaf-Cheney, Gary Brigham, Mark Kablack, Steve Larivee, Sue Meagher, Pat Mitchell, Dave Morin, Jacque Renwick, Rusty Savignac, Bonnie Schimdol, Charles Schimdol, Cliff Schimdol, Moussa Siri, Diane Smith, Steve Smith, Jason Thilton, Liz Thilton, Marianne Wojcicki, Geoffrey Yaglou

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Start Time: 7:03 PM

Approval of minutes from meetings on Thursday, January 11, 2024

Tom Hughes made a motion to accept the minutes from the Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee (WRWAC) meeting on January 11, 2024. Mike Wood seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

DCR updates – Prison Camps, Comet Pond parking, Forestry

Dan updated the committee on some recent DCR improvement to the Prison Camp area. Bill McFaul, foreman in the WRW, reclaimed the hospital area. It was encouraged that folks visit and check out the vista.

Dan updated the committee on how the Comet Pond parking area extension has been progressing. Tree removal has been completed and the next phase is to bring in gravel and create the new parking spaces. The goal is to complete it before the swimming season opens for the year.

Dan and John updated the committee on the status of watershed forestry program, it is still on pause. It was paused when the Healey administration halted forestry on public lands in the state, pending review. The review has been completed and EEA is developing a response. Since the pause, DCR-DWSP has not proposed new lots but forestry operations that were already approved and sold before the pause have continued. The main purpose of the Governor's review was to ensure forestry on Commonwealth properties was meeting their guidelines related to climate change. DCR-DWSP does not anticipate significant changes will be suggested to their watershed forestry program. Dennis commented that he sees the forestry program as supporting carbon sequestration.

Dan updated the committee on the updated WRW trail network in the newly updated public access management plan. DWSP staff have internally come up with draft plan/system on how to best identify, name, and blaze WRW trails. He suggested a couple people from the trail's subcommittee meet with DCR staff to

hear and see what they've come up with and to give their feedback and ideas as well. Brett agreed it was a good idea and will get in touch with Dan soon to set up the meeting.

Dan let the committee know that watershed rangers have recently found a number of tree stands on DWSP property in the WRW that are unidentifiable and don't have any contact information attached to them. He clarified what the tree stand policy is in the watershed. First, all hunters should have applied for their 5-year hunting permit if they plan to hunt on watershed lands in the future. That permit details the tree stand policy. Hunters can put a tree stand 30 days before the hunting season begins and 30 days after the hunting season ends to take down your tree stand. Also, tree stands must be identified (your 5-year hunting permit number). For the unidentifiable tree stands that the rangers have already found, they will tag, alerting hunters that they should take their tree stand down. Rangers will come back 30 days later and any of those tagged, unidentifiable tree stands will be taken down and brought back to the ranger station. Dan asked committee members to spread this information through the local hunting community.

Discussion about keeping Ruben Walker and Prison Camp Roads open to vehicular traffic

The committee discussed their desire to have Ruben Walker and Prison Camp roads opened to general vehicular traffic (outside hunting season). These two roads became closed to general public vehicles when the updated public access management plan went into effect.

Mike Wood cited conversations he's had with sportsmen and people with limited mobility that would like the two roads opened to vehicles. This would allow people to travel from the east side of the watershed to the west side without having to exit the watershed onto public roads, state highways, etc.

Mike Wood made a motion that WRWAC officially recommend that Ruben Walker Road and Prison Camp Road (south of the Prison Camp to Rutland State Park) to be added to the 'roads open to vehicles during daylight hours' in the public access management plan. With access to begin at the end of mud season this year. Dennis seconded the motion. The motion carried with one person not in favor (Cindy Schlener).

John Scannell reminded everyone that the official 10-year update to the public access management plan was completed last year. From DCR's perspective, policies are not intended to be continually altered on a yearly basis.

Mike Wood brought up another concern of his. He spoke about the access plan allowing for modifications to the approved trail network on an annual basis. He feels only allowing modifications to the trail network, and not other activities or regulations, is unfair. John Scannell clarified that under the new access plan, the trail network cannot be expanded to add mileage, just reviewed/assessed within the official 10-year updates to the plan. The total mileage of trails in the watershed cannot increase within the 10-year updates. If a new trail is proposed that same length of trail would have to be reduced from another trail in the watershed. Mike feels as though modifications to policies in the public access plan should happen annually and not just on a 10-year basis.

Continued discussion about open water swimming at Comet Pond

Cindy commented that she attended a recent Hubbardston select board meeting. She stated that at that meeting it appeared the HOA for comet pond was split, roughly 50-50, on whether they supported open water swimming at the pond. Concerns seemed to mainly be focused on safety and increased public usage of the pond.

Sue Meagher, president of the Asnacomet Pond Association, agreed that their association was basically split on their feelings about open water swimming at Comet Pond. The Association is not taking an official position currently.

Jane Dewey questioned if there is a difference between DCR's definitions of open water swimming and distance swimming. She felt the policy wasn't clearly identified in the public access plan and asked what the intent of the policy is. John Scannell answered that DCR's intent, and what the policy states, is that swimmers entering the pond from DCR property need to do so by the beach. From DCR's perspective distance swimming and open water swimming is the same thing, the policy is for all swimmers. DCR does not control 100% of the pond, they only control what happens on the DCR land entering the pond. Jane expressed concern that the wording in the policy refers to 'distance swimming'. She feels if all swimmers are allowed to swim from the beach, the language in the access plan should be updated and clarified.

Dennis made a motion that WRWAC officially ask DCR review and clarify the language related to swimming in the access plan. Cindy seconded the motion. The

motion was unanimously approved. Dennis suggested DCR use open water swimming language and definitions already in place by PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors).

A member of the public spoke in favor of open water swimming on the pond. He spoke about living in a world of uncertainty. He hopes that if a problem or two does arise with increased public usage of the pond, that they can be addressed in a reasonable way, and not used to shut down open water swimming on the pond. He commented that open water swimming is very popular and doesn't expect a huge influx of new swimmers at the pond. He also commented about his concern of updating the access plan on a yearly basis. He spoke of the large public input process that occurred around the 10-year official update of the plan. He feels that an annual update wouldn't allow for as extensive of a public input process that the 10-year updates allow for. Mike Wood reiterated his support for an annual update to the public access plan.

A member of the public brought up the regulations for open water swimming at Walden Pond. It appears the policy for swimming at Comet Pond mirrors that at Walden Pond. There is a recommendation that swimmers do so with a buoy attached to them. There was discussion whether the buoy issue is an official policy or just a recommendation. John Scannell reminded everyone that DCR doesn't control the entire pond, so if someone is swimming in the pond without a buoy, it is impossible to tell if they came from the part of the pond that DCR owns.

A member of the public asked if other ponds in the WRW will be considered to allow open water swimming on them. John Scannell answered that no other ponds in the watershed are currently being considered to allow swimming. The 10-year update to the public access management plan was completed in 2023 and the areas where swimming are allowed in that plan are not set to be changed or updated.

A member of the public commented on their experience visiting Walden Pond and noted erosion on the shoreline. It was asked if DCR's website would be advertising swimming on Comet Pond like how swimming at Walden Pond is advertised. It will not be advertised similarly to Walden Pond. DCR-DWSP controls part of Comet Pond while DCR-Parks controls Walden Pond. DCR-Parks promotes recreation much more so than DCR-DWSP.

Update on legislation regarding WRWAC membership

Jeff Schaaf let everyone know that there is no update at this time regarding the WRWAC legislation.

The item will be carried over to the next meeting.

Member Issues

Brett updated the committee on the WRWAC site visit that occurred at Covered Bridge Road/Cemetery Bridge site, the site of a potential bridge to be built. The next step is to get a ruling from DCR on whether the site is appropriate for a bridge. Funds would then need to be raised for a feasibility study. In general, WRWAC supports building a bridge in the proposed location if the integrity of the river and shoreline is maintained and not impacted, no bank disturbance. Dennis made a motion that the WRWAC officially ask DCR to consider whether they would allow a bridge to be placed in the proposed location. Darren seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved. Brett asked if they should consider working with the Office of Fishing and Boating Access along with DCR on this bridge project. John Scannell answered that they shouldn't need to be involved unless something like a boat ramp would be installed at the site as well.

Darren asked, on behalf of the Rutland Planning Board, if DCR-DWSP has a policy regarding battery storage facilities. There are several proposed for Rutland that may abut water supply property. John Scannell answered that there is not a specific policy in place regarding those facilities. DCR would give their input if it there was a projected impact to water supply lands as an abutter.

Mike Wood mentioned a letter from Sierra Club that was sent to DCR urging them to curtail forestry on their lands. Mike made a motion that WRWAC officially support the DCR's forestry program and are in favor of their habitat enhancement efforts. WRWAC recommends that DCR maintain their forestry program on water supply lands based on current science and best management practices. Dennis seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

Rusty asked if a decision was made regarding whether WRW town residents could get priority for Long Pond large motor permits for boats. John Scannell answered that the DCR general counsel's office said that giving town preference should not happen. Rusty suggested usage numbers on Long Pond be assessed in 2024, with the possibility of awarding more permits in 2025. Dan agreed that the assessment could result in modifications in the program going forward.

A member of the public commented on the public access plan and cited the public meeting at Quabbin Regional High School. He mentioned that at that meeting DCR stated they reserve the right make changes within the 10-year regular update. He feels if DCR has that right, the committee should also have the right to suggest changes within the 10-year window as well. John Scannell clarified that DCR develops the public access management plan as a way of communicating to their regulators that if all goes well, according to the plan, DCR believes the plan provides sufficient protection of the water supply. However, if something is found to be awry, DCR may need to adjust the plan. Mike Wood asked that DCR provide a definitive statement at the next WRWAC meeting as to whether DCR will consider an annual review/request from WRWAC for proposed changes to the public access management plan each September.

Meeting End Time: 8:33 PM

Upcoming WRWAC Meetings

- Thursday, April 11, 2024, at 7PM – Rutland Free Public Library, 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543