

Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting
Thursday, June 13, 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, Brian Keevan

Members of the Public Present: Peter Abramson, Erik Baldwin, Polly Barnard, Dick Gaffrey, Mark Guyrek, Mark Kablack, Steve Larivee, Kim Mongeau, Rusty Savignac, Bonnie Schmohl, Charles Schmohl, Curt Schmohl, Moussa Siri, Diane Smith, Steve Smith, Marianne Wojcicki

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Start Time: 7:03 PM

Approval of minutes from meeting on April 11, 2024

John Root made a motion to accept the minutes from the Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee (WRWAC) meeting on April 11, 2024. Cindy Schlener seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

Forest Stand Improvement (FSI) and invasive plant update

Brian Keevan (DCR) briefed the committee on the FSI program which was started November 2023. He also updated the committee on invasive plant management on watershed lands. A pdf version of Brian's presentation will be available online when/where the meeting minutes are posted.

FSI presentation summary:

- What is forest stand improvement?
 - A form of pre-commercial forest management used to improve vigor, composition, productivity, and quality of forest stands at the sapling stage of regeneration.
 - Ensures tree species diversity in a forest stand by reducing competition at the sapling stage of regeneration.
 - Tree species to be favored and preserved include oaks, hickories, sugar maples, and other hardwoods.
 - Without intervention and removal of competition, these species are more likely to become suppressed and die.
 - Oak and hickories are immensely valuable trees for many species of local wildlife (expected to become even more important as the changing climate causes them to expand their range northwards).
- Why do our watersheds need FSI?
 - Regeneration goals include diversity of tree species.
 - Harvest regeneration sampling dominated by black birch, white pine, and red maple.

- Began in collaboration with white oak sapling release study conducted in Ware River by Jeff Ward, a forest research scientist.
- FSI site assessments
 - Sites harvested 8-20 years prior are assessed by DWSP foresters to determine if FSI is warranted.
 - After 20 years of growth, overstory composition is mostly determined.
 - Sites are typically patch cut openings between 0.5 and 2 acres.
 - If FSI is warranted, a ‘diversity improvement recording’ point is dropped in ArcGIS Field Maps.
 - These points allow field staff to collect FSI data such as stems released, invasive plants present onsite, date of fieldwork, hours worked, watershed, and any relevant site notes.
- Methods
 - Once a tree or group of trees is selected to be released, competing saplings encroaching the crown from the sides are felled.
 - Released trees must be above deer/moose browse height, vigorous, stout, and free of deformities, disease, or insect infestation.
 - Tree species to be felled include common species like white pine, red maple, and black birch. These abundant, fast-growing species often outcompete other species.
 - Other species cut include interfering native vegetation such as witch hazel, grape vines, and mountain laurel.
 - After undergoing chainsaw safety training sponsored by DCR, a team of 2-3 experienced DCR employees use electric chainsaws to fell small trees, typically 8” in diameter and under.
 - Felled trees remain onsite to decompose and provide food, cover and/or habitat for various species of plants, animals, and fungi.
 - No heavy equipment is required to cut or remove brush from debris site.
- The FSI team
 - Christian Smith: Forest Resiliency Coordinator
 - Austin Gelinas: Forestry Assistant
 - Patrick Maher: Forestry Assistant
- Results for Quabbin Reservoir
 - 4,258 stems released in total across Quabbin Reservoir
 - 96% of stems released are oaks, hickory, and sugar maple
 - 4% of stems released include other species to improve site diversity

- Crew statistics for the winter 2023 season: Wachusett and Quabbin Reservoirs (overall stats as of 3/15/2024; last day of winter season)
 - Total fieldwork days: 51
 - Total acres covered: 125.5
 - Total person hours: 628.25
 - Total working/cutting hours (crew): 221.75
 - Work rate for crew: ~0.56 acres/hour and ~47 stems released/acre
 - Total stems released: 5,961
- What's next?
 - FSI: is intended to be a continuous component of DWSP Forest Management
 - Over time, the number of locations requiring FSI will catch up as fewer harvests enter the 8–20-year window for FSI.
 - Experiment with FSI in opening younger than 8 years for white oak resilience.
 - Often suppressed with poor form by the time of FSI at 8-20 years.
 - Incorporate invasive plant control, removal of interfering native vegetation, coppice thinning, and sanitation cuts into FSI activities (non-commercial forest management/improvement).

Invasive Plant Management presentation summary:

As part of the Forests as Climate Solutions (FACS) initiative, EEA convened a Climate Forestry Committee (CFC) to make recommendations for management of forested lands in the context of climate change and the statutory mandates for reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases. The committee included experts and academics with a range of perspectives on the topic of forest management. The committee's final report released in December clearly indicates that the Committee strongly agrees on the importance of controlling the establishment and spread of invasive plants. They recommended addressing invasive plants before and after active forest management to prevent their spread and population increase. The committee suggests prioritizing intervention and treatment based on the invasives curve, focusing on initial infestations and areas with over 30% invasive plant cover. They also recommend requiring an invasive plant inventory and control plan when active forest management is performed and monitoring recently managed areas for invasive species. Additionally, the Committee suggests limiting the introduction or sale of non-native plant species and utilizing chemical treatments when necessary and in accordance with recommended best management practices. Overall, the document emphasizes the need to actively manage invasive plants to protect forest ecosystems and their associated benefits.

With this support from EEA's FACS Initiative, the Division seeks to 'more effectively address the impact of invasive plants on our watershed forests with an emphasis on climate-orientated, passive management techniques that make a forest more resilient.'

DWSP's immediate goal will be to provide an update to the 2011 Terrestrial Invasive Plant (TIP) strategy this fall. This will not be a complete rewrite or new plan, but an update that incorporates additional information on both invasive species and recommended treatments, and more information on how herbicides will be utilized on Division properties.

EEA and its daughter agencies will be working towards development of a state-wide Invasive Species Plan in 2025. DWSP's experience and planning efforts will have some influence in the drafting of that plan.

In this update, the Division advocates for a broader approach to the control of invasive and interfering plants and outlines a plan to employ an integrated vegetation management approach that will not only be more effective but minimize the potential impact on water quality, natural resources, and public health.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) emphasizes a multi-strategy approach to effective control of a population. In some cases, biological controls have been released in Massachusetts with varying degrees of success (the beetle released for purple loosestrife is working quite well, while the weevil released for mile-a-minute is having little effect).

DWSP has little influence over statewide biocontrol efforts, so on DWSP lands our approach will typically be some combination of mechanical and chemical treatments. We would likely perform initial cutting or mowing on larger plants and heavy infestations and follow up with spot applications of herbicide on smaller resprouting plants. This minimizes the amount of herbicide needed, focusing spraying on targeted plants, and avoiding desirable native vegetation as it attempts to re-occupy the growing space. Where herbicide treatments are impractical or restricted, we will still utilize mechanical treatments to the extent possible within out capacity to meet specific goals (for instance, protection of a rare species population).

This summer, DCR staff and contractors will perform follow up treatments as needed in several ongoing habitat restoration projects. Funding for the contracts

has been through EEA Stewardship which provides money for DWSP, DCR state parks, and MassWildlife to undertake specific habitat projects that might not be feasible within annual agency budgets.

Christian and the seasonal FSI 'strike team' will focus additional work at forest management sites including landings and skid trails as well as regeneration openings. This is in line with both the CFC recommendations and with our current 2011 strategy. The hope is to begin work before landings and skid trails are used and then follow up in subsequent years to reduce any invasive populations that may be enhanced by the harvest disturbance.

Early Detection and Rapid Response (EDRR) work will continue as we try to contain some recent and still small infestations of a variety of invasive species listed here.

Knotweed trails utilizing a combination of mowing and herbicide have begun. Practitioners in the field have noted very good control over knotweed using a late spring mowing followed by a mid to late summer foliar herbicide of the resprouts. We also intend to pilot test the cut stem/drip method for both effectiveness and efficiency.

Our plan encompasses a handful of native species that become problematic for forest regeneration under certain circumstances including long-term deer overpopulation and fire suppression. In our case, these may include mountain laurel, witch hazel, striped maple, beech, grape, and hay scented fern. The goal for any treatments of these species would be simply a reduction in density enough to allow for tree regeneration to establish and develop into resilient forest cover. Hay scented fern has long been noted as a symptom of heavy deer browse at Quabbin, it is very difficult to control mechanically, but we know it responds well to quite low concentrations of foliar herbicide. Again, the goal is not eradication but simply enough control to allow for native plant diversity to become established.

Cindy Schlener asked what herbicides would be used. The herbicides to be used are from a list recommended MassDEP to be used in sensitive areas.

Cindy Schlener asked is goats could be used a mechanical control via their grazing. There are no current plans to use goats. It was unclear whether DWSP would allow for domesticated animals on watershed property for that purpose.

Mike Wood asked if funding for this program is projected to be long-term or year-to-year. Brian answered that funding for the program will be in the budget going forward.

Update on Prison Camp vandalism

Dan briefed the committee on recent vandalism at the Rutland Prison Camp.

4 of the 6 recently installed grates over the cells have been ripped off. The grate across the root cellar has been ripped off. Rutland Historical Society oversaw the installation of the grates and have been notified of the issue. The grates are still at the prison camp. There was discussion on how the grates were not installed correctly. It appears the grates were easily ripped off the hinges with the locks on the gates still intact. This flaw should be addressed when the grates are reinstalled. The grates were put in roughly 5 weeks ago.

There has been a report that the posts the grates were hung on are also being ripped out. The lock on the gate that leads up to the hospital has been cut off. A gate located on the back side of the hill has also been ripped out of the ground. There has been a long history of vandalism in the area.

Brett Russ was recently given a report of a white pickup truck seen in the watershed, with a chain hooked up to it, attempting to pull out a gate. This happened during the day and appeared to be the same gate mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Monitoring/policing of the area was discussed. It appears most, but not all, vandalism occurs at night. Involving state or town police patrols of the area at night were discussed. Darren Ross indicated that Rutland police are currently investigating/monitoring the issue.

DWSP ranger staffing in the WRW was discussed. There are currently 3 full-time rangers. The rangers currently do not have a night shift. Mike Wood commented that he would like to see a night shift created for the rangers and/or for them to coordinate with town police regarding night patrols.

Closing certain gates during nighttime hours was discussed. Darren Ross advocated for more patrols over locking more gates and closing additional areas to vehicles. Dan Clark spoke about potential plans to use a 'mobile security system' at the prison camp. It is a cell tower based live feed camera.

Final language related to Comet Pond swimming

Dan briefed the committee on what will be the final language in the WRW public access plan regarding swimming at Comet Pond.

All references to ‘Distance swimming’ will be replaced with ‘open water swimming’. This is mainly due to the ‘open water swimming’ term already being used in the regulations regarding swimming at Walden Pond. The new language was updated in the access plan online and new signage has already been installed with the updated language at Comet Pond.

A member of the public commented on concern over erosion of the shoreline. She would like signage to ask people to keep off the shoreline to prevent erosion as well asking people to keep their distance from private landowner’s shorelines. She also voiced concern over paddleboarding recently being banned at Long Pond and Comet Pond being the only local pond where paddleboarding is allowed; the concern is over an influx of visitors to the pond. She also referenced seeing lots of dogs on the pond; dogs are not allowed in the water at Comet Pond. She asked if there is a plan in place to monitor activities on the pond and determine whether increased usage is resulting in more pollution and shoreline erosion to the pond. Dan Clark answered that there is currently no monitoring plan in place.

There was discussion regarding multiple user groups (kayakers, canoers, paddleboarders, boaters) using the boat ramp to launch their watercrafts. It was noted that people with boats are the only group allowed to use the boat ramp. The public access plan states that paddleboarders are only allowed to put their craft in the water from the beach area, not the boat ramp.

Dennis commented that he doesn’t agree with the decision to close paddleboarding at Long Pond. Jeff Schaaf acknowledged increased usage at Comet Pond but was unsure whether restrictions at Long Pond were the direct cause.

A member of the public asked about a sign at Comet Pond regarding PFAS chemicals. Dan Clark answered that the Department of Public Health tested water at Comet Pond and other areas of the WRW. The tests came back with PFAS levels where they recommend not consuming more than 1 fish/week in those areas. Alerts have been posted in multiple areas of the watershed. These PFAS chemicals are a broad environmental issue, and the chemicals seem to be found wherever they test for them. Advisories are issued when levels reach a certain threshold and are a public health concern. Sampling water at new/different locations was suggested. Dan answered that he would bring the request to his EQ team.

Discussion about large motor permits for Long Pond

Rusty expressed his disappointment regarding the decision to only give out 50 large motor permits for Long Pond. 73 people ultimately applied. Rusty and many of his friends did not win a permit via the lottery. He asked how the lottery was run. Dan answered that all applicants' names were hidden, everyone was given a number (1-73), and an online random number generator was used to pick the winning numbers for the lottery. The lottery was recorded and is available to view online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19LurDMZS5o>. It was noted that prior to the Ware River Public Access Plan being updated, WRWAC had recommended 80 large motor permits be given out per season.

Jeff Schaaf asked if DCR would reconsider the number of permits given out for the current season. Dan answered that 50 permits would be the limit for 2024. DCR has committed to and already initiated a study of Long Pond usage to get a better assessment of how the permits are being used. There is the potential to adjust permits numbers for 2025. Results from the Long Pond usage study will be presented at a future meeting.

Dennis questioned why paddleboarding was outlawed at Long Pond. He doesn't believe the decision was made based on water quality data.

A member of the public was speaking loudly and out of turn. He was asked to leave. The person left the meeting.

The Long Pond application/permit process was discussed. Prior to 2018, people were required to apply in-person at 7am on a specified morning in May. All permits for the year were given out on that date. Since 2018, the application/permit process moved online. By 2024 the public access plan had been updated it was decided to implement a lottery system if more than 50 applications were received.

Discussion regarding reopening Ruben Walker and Prison Camp Roads to vehicular traffic

The committee previously sent a letter to the DCR commissioner requesting Ruben Walker and Prison Camp roads reopened to vehicular traffic. A response letter was given to the committee and is attached at the end of these minutes. In the letter, the Commissioner indicated that the road network will remain as it is. However, it was stated that the DCR commissioner is willing to attend the next meeting and listen to the committee's concerns regarding changes to the latest

update to the public access plan. Mike Wood suggested that everyone review the access plan ahead of the meeting to have their questions/concerns ready to go for the commissioner.

Rusty voiced concern that every time the public access plan is updated (every 10 years) it seems to result in the loss of access to the public. He suggested that access should only be changed after a problem is noted rather than evaluate all regulations every 10 years.

Member Issues

Darren Ross spoke about a fire that occurred on Ware River Watershed property on March 19, 2023. There was no delay in the response to the fire due to locked gates. 9 towns were involved in the response to that fire. The towns are looking to be reimbursed by DWSP for some/all of the cost of putting out that fire. Darren presented Dan Clark with a bill for \$29,083. Dan will pass it on to the appropriate party.

Dennis mentioned that the latest set of watershed signs being installed throughout the watershed are missing the horse symbol.

Dean Zuppio asked if DCR was planning to grade a portion of the Ware River Rail Trail. Dan answered that it would probably happen this summer, but he needs to check with the roads foreman to get a definitive answer on that timeline.

A member of the public asked about a bridge that was replaced on the east branch of the Ware River above the Barre Falls dam. A new bridge was built, and the old bridge was seemingly left on site. Dan will investigate the issue.

Brett updated the committee on a request that was sent to DCR to construct a bridge on Covered Bridge Road. A response letter was drafted and is attached at the end of these minutes.

Meeting End Time: 8:58 PM

Upcoming WRWAC Meetings

- September 26, 2024; 7pm – Rutland Free Public Library, 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543



June 12, 2024

Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee
Jeffery Schaff, Chairman
Mike Wood, Vice Chairman

Dear Committee Members:

Thank you for your letter of April 19, 2024, regarding public vehicular access to DCR watershed properties in the Ware River watershed. The Agency appreciates the Committee's continued engagement and partnership with DCR in this watershed as DCR strives to balance our mission to protect these lands for the purpose of water supply and environmental protection, while also allowing a great array of public access activities to occur on these lands. As you are aware, these lands were purchased for watershed protection, and this must remain the focus of our mission. However, we also realize the significant benefits these protected lands have given the public because they remain open and available for public recreation. This is truly a wonderful amenity that our watershed lands provide, but it is also challenging for DCR to balance our mission of protection with managing lands for public access. DCR does not take this responsibility lightly.

As you are aware, DCR spent a significant amount of time gathering public feedback and comments in the development of the Ware River Watershed Public Access Management Plan over the course of more than 2 years, which included regular involvement of the Advisory Committee. We realized that as DCR manages these lands for long-term watershed protection, the decisions ultimately made within the plan would not be supported by everyone. But we wanted to be sure that input was received from user groups that would allow DCR to make informed decisions.

The science of watershed protection is challenging and DCR tried from the beginning to lay out the rationale for its protection. Watershed protection is best thought of as a gradient, and the highest level of watershed protection is total control of watershed lands, and public access is excluded completely. DCR has never taken that approach with its watersheds like some water supplies have done (Worcester being the closest example of a system that allows no public access). On the other end of the spectrum would be total, unrestricted public access; there are no examples of public water suppliers taking this approach. DCR lands somewhere in the middle and believes it can provide sufficient protection while still allowing some public access at levels and locations that don't conflict with our watershed protection goals. Our responsibility as a regulated public water supply is to provide proof of that to our regulators.

The goal of watershed protection is to evaluate potential risks from activities and to minimize those risks before impacts can occur to water quality. Waiting until a water quality problem exists is too late. Public vehicular access to watershed lands is high risk activity with the potential to impact watershed resources. This includes the risk of spills, increased illegal dumping and additional erosion on gravel roadways. Erosion of gravel roadways can significantly impact water resources,

and the more vehicles on gravel roadways, the higher likelihood of issues. This is particularly true following extreme weather events when unrestricted vehicles cause excessive rutting and erosion. In addition, climate change is a significant concern as it relates to our gravel roadways, exasperating the potential risk. Changes in weather, including warmer winters, intense precipitation, and wetter periods throughout the year are a significant concern. Recent years are a good example of this. DCR watershed lands in the Ware River were temporarily closed last year to vehicular access in mid-summer due to flooding rains. DCR will need to be diligent in maintaining and reviewing road conditions to be as protective as possible of adjacent resources.

DCR's goal with its approved roadway network is to provide access to many of the significant locations that users visit, while limiting loop or cut-through roads. The roadway network is focused on specific destinations for users. I am aware that staff met with groups of sportsmen/women as well as historic society individuals to understand locations where they believed specific access was necessary. Staff accommodated access to all these locations by revising the final plan.

We believe that the plan as developed provides significant areas for hunting, fishing, historical visits, and for access by those who have limited mobility. The network of roadways available for public vehicular access far exceed those in our other watersheds, other DCR lands and most public lands in Massachusetts.

While I understand this plan does not satisfy everyone, the final plan provides a balance between public access and required protection of these watershed resources. In the spirit of collaboration and building off the time and energy that has been put into the Ware River Public Access Management Plan, I would like to find a time to meet with the Committee to discuss the impacts of the plan and any possible changes that need to occur. From there, we can find a time to check-in.

I again thank the Committee for their efforts in providing guidance to DCR in the work we do to manage and protect the Commonwealth lands.

Sincerely,



Brian Arrigo,
Commissioner

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS · EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY & ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

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Maura T. Healey
Governor

Kimberley Driscoll
Lt. Governor

Rebecca L. Tepper, Secretary
Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs

Brian Arrigo, Commissioner
Department of Conservation & Recreation



April 18, 2024

Trails Subcommittee
Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee

Re: Proposed Bridge on Covered Bridge Road

Dear Committee Members:

The Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee trails subcommittee wants to construct/install a bridge over the Ware River on Covered Bridge Road and formally asked DCR to approve the idea of a bridge project. At the WRWAC meeting on April 11, 2024, we informed the Committee that DCR was not approving the planned bridge. DCR explained that under the Watershed Protection Act and Regulations, such a project would require a variance to be approved by DCR. A variance is needed for work within 200 feet of a stream and the Act assumes that work within this Primary Protection Zone is contrary to the purposes of the Act to protect the water resources. It has been DCR’s policy to deny variance requests for work on DCR property, which should be the most protected areas of the watersheds. At the April 11th meeting DCR was asked how Wachusett Greenways received approvals for bridges on the Mass Central Rail Trail. DCR said it would investigate the specifics of that work to see if it would apply to this request.

The Mass Central Rail Trail is a Commonwealth-supported project to provide a trail from Boston to Northampton, mostly on the railbed of the former Central Mass Railroad. This corridor crosses DCR property in several areas (as well as other state agency land), including through the Wachusett and Ware River watersheds. When the project was first presented to DCR DWSP over 20 years ago, DCR chose to partner with Wachusett Greenways for number of reasons. The project provided a unique east-west trail connection across much of the state, and DCR’s participation was strongly encouraged. On watershed lands, it was an opportunity to concentrate public access onto this one corridor that was controlled and already located on an existing railbed. In addition, it allowed for bicycle use on a single, dedicated trail. This allowed DCR to better enforce its rules about biking not being allowed on many other roads and trails in the watersheds and provided an acceptable alternative.

DCR does not believe the same unique opportunity is true about the Covered Bridge Road trail. In addition to the concerns about exceptions to the Watershed Protection Act, the proposed bridge provides no management advantage to DCR; it does not improve access or benefit operational duties. In fact, the addition of a bridge in this location allows for expansion of public access by

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adding a new route. Finally, DCR has concerns about this increased public access and potential violations in this area were the bridge to be installed. Therefore, DCR stands by its decision to not allow the bridge to be constructed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Scannell".

John M. Scannell
Director
DCR Division of Water Supply Protection
