

Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting
Wednesday, September 13, 2023
7:00 PM

Location: Quabbin Regional High School auditorium, 800 South Street, Barre, MA 01005

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

Alternate:

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: **Margo Petracone**

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: Maria Beiter, Dan Clark, John Scannell

Members of the Public Present: Lucy Allen, Lydia Barter, West Barter, Brian Belfer, Beatrice Beteaie, Sean Blood, Deb Carlson, Lexi Dewey, Joseph Ethier, Eric Goodhart, Dick Hutchings, Denise Kellicker, Jim Kennington, Pete Mahoney, Paul Morrison, Sarah Nichols, Mike Perkins, Rusty Savignac, Vimmie West, Michael Wetherbee, Marianne Wojcicki, Dean Zuppio

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Start Time: 7:05 PM

Approval of minutes from meeting on Thursday, July 27, 2023

This item was tabled until the next meeting.

Presentation of the newly adopted Ware River Watershed Public Access Management Plan and implementation discussion

Dan Clark presented the 2023 DCR-DWSP Ware River Watershed Public Access Management Plan to the committee, highlighting changes from the previous plan.

- The Ware River watershed, Quabbin and Wachusett Reservoirs provide drinking water for over 3 million people in MA (43%).
 - High quality of water within the watersheds means it can be distributed without filtration – but watershed protection and management are critical.
- Ware River Watershed
 - Active part of DCR/MWRA water supply system that provides unfiltered drinking water to over 3 million people.
 - DWSP owns 24,000 acres of land.
 - DWSP controls developments rights on 3,500 acres (WPRs).
 - DCR State Parks manages about 300 acres of DWSP land as “Rutland State Park”, focused around Whitehall Pond.
- DWSP Goals
 - Improve watershed protection.
 - Maintain or enhance recreational opportunities.
 - Adjust past policies that did not adequately provide watershed protection.
 - Meet DEP requirements for water supply.

- Public process to date
 - Kick-off meeting with Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee (WRWAC) and public – April 2018.
 - Presented Watershed Management Principles and Public Engagement Plan to WRWAC and public – September 2018.
 - DWSP worked with stakeholder groups (e.g., mountain bikers, sportsmen/women, horseback riders, snowmobilers, etc.) to ID key issues – September to December 2018.
 - DWSP released a stakeholder survey and received over 900 responses – December 2018 to January 2019.
 - DWSP worked on solution analyses with stakeholders; proposed solutions to WRWAC and public – spring and fall 2019.
 - Plan put on hold in March 2020, Re-started October 2022.
 - WRWAC meeting on 11/17/2022 to get feedback on new draft that incorporated public input from 2019.
 - Public meeting held on 11/29/2022 to receive comments.
 - Public comment period through 2/28/2023.
 - WRWAC meeting with DEP on 2/24/2023.
 - Secretary briefing on 3/9/2023.
 - March-June 2023
 - Undersecretary follow-up meeting
 - New DCR Commissioner briefing
 - Several meetings with DEP regulators to discuss additional changes to access policies.
- Recreation in the Ware River Watershed in comparison to other entities

*Exceptions	MassWildlife	Mass Audubon	DCR State Parks	DWSP - Sudbury	DWSP- Wachusett	DWSP- Quabbin	DWSP-Ware River
Horseback riding	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Snowmobiling	✗*	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗*	✓
Single-track biking	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗*	✗	✓
Vehicle access	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Dogs	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗*	✗	✓
Pedestrian	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Night Access	✗*	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗*

- Key elements of access plan update
 - Intake Exclusion Zone
 - 17-acres intake exclusion zone – no public access allowed
 - Pre-existing: no change
 - Intake Buffer Zone *new
 - Creation of 1-km (483 acres) intake buffer zone – pedestrian access only with some exceptions
 - New element to shift activity away from Ware River Intake
 - Public access to parking lot along west side of Ware River will remain open for canoe/kayak launching.
 - New barriers will be added to the parking lot to prevent vehicles from directly accessing the Ware River to improve water quality protection.
 - Hours of access
 - Existing policy: All DWSP land in the Ware River open 24/7, leading to safety concerns.
 - First draft policy: DWSP Ware River watershed lands will be open for public access one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset, mirroring other watershed lands and DCR parks.
 - Final policy: DWSP Ware River watershed land will be open for public access one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset, mirroring other watershed lands and DCR parks.
 - Snowmobile clubs can request group ride permits at night.
 - Night access permit process for hunters of specific species per MassWildlife regulations
 - Dogs
 - Existing policy: Dogs were allowed on DWSP lands in the Ware River watershed with restrictions but not leashing requirements.
 - First draft policy: Dogs must be leashed on a 6’ or shorter leash at all times on DWSP property, except licensed hunters may have dogs off leash to hunt or train.
 - Final policy: Dogs must be leashed on a 6’ or shorter leash at all times on DWSP property, except licensed hunters may have dogs off leash to hunt or train.
 - Trails
 - Existing policy: Separate trails for different user groups
 - No single-track bike trails.

- First draft policy: Developed a set of well-defined multi-use trails.
 - Trails avoid wetland areas, emphasize connectivity.
 - Trails will be shared among pedestrian, bikers, horseback riders, and snowmobilers (some exclusions)
 - Allows for single-track mountain biking on specified trails.
- Final policy: unchanged from first draft
- Trail network: changes from existing plan to 2023 plan

	2010	2023	Difference
Bike Trails DWSP	29.8 miles	75.4 miles	+ 45.6 miles
ACOE	3.8 miles	3.8 miles	0
TOTAL	36.7 miles	78.9 miles	+45.6 miles
	2010	2023	Difference
Horse Trails DWSP	37.1 miles	54.7 miles	+ 17.6 miles
ACOE	3.8 miles	3.8 miles	0
TOTAL	40.9 miles	58.5 miles	+17.6 miles
	2010	2023	Difference
Snowmobile Trails DWSP	20.9 miles	37.7 miles	+ 16.8 miles
ACOE	0.8 miles	1.1 miles	+ 0.3 miles
TOTAL	21.7 miles	38.8 miles	+ 17.1 miles

- Large-group horse permits
 - Existing policy: Horses are allowed on designated routes under specific conditions, and large group (>25) horse permits were issued.
 - First draft policy: All large group horse permits would be eliminated.
 - Final policy: Up to 2 large group horse permits will be issued per year.
 - Permit will allow DCR to review and approve/deny the route, require manure pick-up, and will have pre-and post-ride inspections by Watershed Rangers
- Snowmobiles
 - Existing policy: Snowmobiles allowed in specific zones with restrictions (snow cover, timing, etc.)
 - First draft policy: snowmobiles allowed on specific trails, most of which will be multi-use.
 - Night access permits will be issued for trail grooming, etc.
 - Final policy: Snowmobiles allowed on specific trails, most of which will be multi-use.

- Night access permits will be issued for trail grooming, etc.
 - Snowmobile clubs can request night access permits for organized rides.
- DWSP Internal Roads
 - Existing policy: All DWSP internal roads are open 24/7 April-December; roads are closed during mud season, except Coldbrook is year-round when possible.
 - First draft policy: All DWSP internal roads closed to unauthorized vehicle traffic except Coldbrook Road, which would be open from dawn to dusk.
 - Intervale Road would be open dawn to dusk to allow vehicle access specifically to the Prison Camps (~5 miles total)
 - A series of DCR gates will be unlocked and open to permitted hunters in vehicles Oct-Dec
 - Final policy: ~7 miles of roads open to vehicles (includes Coldbrook, Intervale, and others) from dawn to dusk, prioritizing access to hunting, fishing, and historic sites.
 - Allows for periodic review of road network to see if network meets access needs; adjustments (without expansion) will be considered.
 - A series of DCR gates will be unlocked and open to permitted hunters in vehicles Oct-Dec
- Long Pond
 - Existing policy: large motor permits given out – no cap on number of permits.
 - First draft policy: Large boat motor permitting will be eliminated.
 - Boats must comply with 20/25 hp motor restriction.
 - DEP requirements of no water skiing/tubing
 - Final policy: 2024: 50 large motor permits issued by lottery.
 - Require permit applicants to identify use of pond on application (fishing, water skiing, both)
 - Pond usage study (observations of boating activity throughout season, e.g., boat motor size; usage; follow-up user survey)
 - Make determination if further restriction of permits or boat size is warranted.

- Comet Pond
 - Existing policy: Open water swimming allowed.
 - No defined entry/exit point
 - First draft policy: Per DCR-wide policy, no “distance swimming” is allowed due to safety concerns.
 - Permit program will be developed to allow larger outboard motors for existing Comet Pond residents.
 - Designated for paddleboarding; consistent with a public swimming beach on the pond.
 - Final policy: An open water swimming entry point will be identified east of boat ramp; distance swimming will not be restricted.
 - Signage similar to Walden Pond will be install at the entry point.
 - Permit program will be developed to allow larger outboard motors for existing Comet Pond residents.
 - Designated for paddleboarding; consistent with a public swimming beach on the pond.
- Other key issues of access plan update
 - Procedural
 - DCR will provide reasonable notice to WRWAC for temporary trail closures, road closures, etc.
 - Changes to trail network can be submitted annually through WRWAC sub-committees and committee to DWSP for final decision.
 - DWSP will rely on Friend group and user groups to help educate about and reinforce the rules among their constituencies.
 - DWSP will reserve the right to become more restrictive if access issues arise and cannot be resolved.
- Next steps
 - Post final plan on DCR website: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/ware-river-watershed-public-access-management-plan-update-2023/download>
 - Begin plan implementation:
 - Make changes to the road network (new gates, etc.).
 - Erect vehicle barrier to river on Route 122 parking lot.
 - Update trail network signage.
 - Update other signage to reflect new policies.

A comment/question period from the WRWAC committee followed the presentation:

- Cindy Schlener thanked DCR for listening to public input asked for adequate passage for horseback riders where new gates get installed.
- Tom Hughes asked for more information on how the Long Pond permit lottery will work. Dan answered that the application will go online in the spring of next year and if more than 50 people apply, a random lottery will be applied and the first 50 selected will get a large motor permit. There is no plan to give priority to residents.
- Dave Flick asked for more information about access to historic sites. John Scannell answered that after considering public input, all/most gates that lead to historic sites will be left open regularly.
- Margo Petracone asked for more information about the large group horse ride permits. John Scannell clarified that group permits are only needed for groups larger than 25 people, any group smaller than that doesn't need a permit. The regulations in the new plan allow for 2 large group horse ride permits to be issued per year.

A comment/question period was also allowed for the public:

- A member of the public asked about Comet Pond for non-residents. John Scannell answered that the general public is allowed on the pond and that the 20/25 hp limit to launch a boat is not changing.
- Mike Weatherbee asked about 302 CMR 12 that excludes snowmobiling on DCR property. John Scannell clarified that the CMR in question applies to DCR parks and not DCR-DWSP.
- Dean Zuppio asked about the internal road closures, specifically Intervale to the Prison Camps during winter. John Scannell answered that gates will still be closed on January 1st, as has happened in the past. There shouldn't be any significant changes to how roads have been managed during wintertime in the past.
- Rusty Savignac asked about paddleboarding. It is being allowed at Comet Pond and not at Long Pond.
- Lucy Allen thanked DCR for preserving vehicle access to historic sites in the new plan.
- A member of the public mentioned a previous discussion from years ago about access to Comet Pond near the boat ramp. There was a proposal to put more sand in the area to make access easier and less rocky. Dan Clark answered that the plan will be reevaluated and looked into, probably not until next season.

- A member of the public asked about why the decision was made to limit large horse group permitted rides to two a year. John Scannell answered that it was a compromise made with DEP, as opposed to giving out no large horse ride permits a year.
- Cindy Schlener asked if the Coldbrook Road parking area on Route 122 is inside the 1km buffer zone around the intake. Dan answered that the parking lot is outside the buffer zone and still open to the public.
- Dean asked if anything has changed regarding the permit process for trail maintenance. Dan Clark answered that the process hasn't changed. People can get in touch with Dan or Kim English, one of the rangers in the Ware River watershed.
- Dean asked about new trails/access that are planned around the buffer zone. He asked if snowmobilers should ride on the existing trails until the new ones are built. Dan answered that work does need to be done around the buffer zone and to use existing trails until the work is completed.
- A member of the public suggested any new gates that get installed should also provide for stroller access. They also asked if any changes to Brigham Pond usage were in the new plan. There are no changes to Brigham Pond regulations.
- Another member of the public asked that new gates also provide bike access. They also asked if bicycle groups would be able to apply for night access permits. The answer was no.

Member Issues

N/A

Meeting End Time: 8:09 PM

Upcoming WRWAC Meetings

- Thursday, October 5, 2023, at 7PM – Rutland Free Public Library, 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543