



*Rebecca L. Tepper, Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Frederick A. Laskey, Executive Director, MWRA
William Meehan, North Worcester County Quabbin Anglers, Quabbin Fishermen's Association
Matthew A. Romero, MWRA Advisory Board
Fred Heyes, Swift River Valley Historical Society*

Water Supply Protection Trust

December 18, 2025

Virtual Meeting conducted via Webex

Attendance

Trustees

Frederick A. Laskey, Executive Director, MWRA
Vandana Rao, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Fred Heyes, Swift River Valley Historical Society

MWRA

Kathy Murtagh, Chief Operating Officer
Rebecca Weidman, Deputy Chief Operating Officer
Stephen Cullen, Deputy Chief Operating Officer
Carolyn Francisco-Murphy, General Counsel
Valerie Moran, Director, Waterworks
Katie Ronan, Chief of Staff
Thomas Durkin, Director of Finance
Stephen Estes-Smargiassi, Director of Planning & Sustainability
Michael Cole, Budget Director
James Coyne, Budget Manager
Hillary Coolidge, Project Manager, Environmental Permitting

DCR

John Scannell, Director, Division of Water Supply Protection
Dan Clark, Regional Director, Quabbin/Ware
Kelley Freda, Regional Director, Wachusett/Sudbury
Joel Zimmerman, Watershed Planning Coordinator
Ken MacKenzie, DWSP Natural Resources Director
Scott Campbell, Director of Government Affairs
Brian Keevan, Natural Resource Analyst

WSCAC

Moussa Siri, Executive Director

Other

Daniel Hammock, North Worcester County Quabbin Anglers Association
Clayton Sydla, Quabbin Fishermen's Association
Bill Pula, Quabbin Watershed Advisory Committee

The meeting was convened at 10:05am.

1. Welcome and Introductions

Trustee Laskey welcomed attendees, introduced himself as the Chair and called the December 18, 2025 meeting of the Water Supply Protection Trust (WSPT) to order. It was noted that the meeting was being conducted via remote participation and would be recorded.

Three of the five Trustees, as well as several MWRA and DCR Division of Water Supply Protection (DWSP) staff, attended the virtual meeting via Webex. Trustee Laskey called the roll to establish attendance and a quorum. It was noted that Brigadier General William J. Meehan, North Worcester County Anglers and Quabbin Fishermen's Association, and Matthew Romero, Executive Director of the MWRA Advisory Board (Designee for Richard E. Raiche, MWRA Advisory Board) were not in attendance.

2. Approval of the Minutes

A motion was made by Trustee Rao and seconded by Trustee Heyes to approve the September 18, 2025 WSPT meeting minutes. General Counsel Francisco-Murphy called the roll. The Trustees unanimously voted to approve the minutes.

3. Personnel and Hiring Update

Mr. John Scannell, Division of Water Supply Protection Director, summarized DWSP's ongoing hiring efforts. He reported that the Commonwealth is currently in a hiring freeze and DWSP has unfortunately been impacted. DWSP began the fiscal year with one vacancy and now has eight staff vacancies. Mr. Scannell explained that agencies have caps on the number of FTE staff they can employ, and DCR is currently over its cap. As a result, DCR is not allowed to fill vacant positions. Staff in the Commissioner's Office have had conversations with Trustee Laskey in relation to moving Water Supply positions out from under the agency's cap and instead creating a separate cap for the Trust-funded positions. Mr. Scannell noted that, to his knowledge, such movement has not yet occurred. He reiterated the eight vacancies within DWSP and noted a ninth vacancy to come in the last week of December 2025.

Trustee Laskey acknowledged that this topic will be a priority for the March 2026 WSPT meeting and noted that a draft is currently in process and will be sent as soon as a final version is approved. He assured the Trust that staff continue to make progress on the issue.

Mr. Daniel Hammock, North Worcester County Quabbin Anglers Association, requested more information regarding the process of Trust-funded items and how they are, to some degree, disconnected from general state budget. He emphasized the importance of adequate staffing to accomplish DWSP goals. Trustee Laskey acknowledged the request and responded that a separate meeting could be established to discuss the details further. Mr. Hammock asked if it is prohibited for employees to transfer from Wachusett to Quabbin, or the other way around, if employees desire to do so. Mr. Scannell responded that there is currently no movement among any positions within the agency.

4. Update of Forest Reserves on DWSP Land

Mr. Scannell shared an update on DWSP Forest Reserves. He explained that under the EEA's Forests as Climate Solutions Initiative, the committee that was put in place to review the Initiative recommended that the Commonwealth consider designating some lands as reserves. EEA and the three land-holding divisions (DWSP, DCR State Parks, and the Department of Fish and Game's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife) have all

been collaborating on this effort. Staff have assembled a guidance document for the agencies. Within Water Supply, staff have been examining parcels and areas of land that could be designated as forest reserves.

Mr. Scannell noted that designations could occur on lands that do not impact DWSP's mission of supporting a resistant and resilient forest. He clarified that areas of the forest where DWSP has determined that active management is still needed are not areas under consideration for reserve designation. Mr. Scannell further noted that the Environmental Bond Bill includes language that sets forth a process for designating reserves, and that DWSP will be waiting to see where that lands with the legislature when they complete and pass the legislation. Mr. Scannell emphasized that there is nothing within the EEA Initiative that would change access to DWSP property, and specifically referenced hunting and fishing, which have been a public concern in the past. He explained that there is nothing being proposed that would limit the access that already exists. As DWSP gets farther down the road in designation, Mr. Scannell offered to report back and share progress with the Board.

Trustee Laskey noted that the report would be accepted and placed on file.

5. Preliminary Report on Infrared Drone Deer Density Study at Quabbin

Mr. Ken MacKenzie, DWSP Natural Resources Director, shared a presentation on the usage of thermal imagery to estimate deer density.

Mr. MacKenzie shared background on deer density estimation, which he explained is a fundamental tool in wildlife management. Many biologists utilize a range of methods to estimate deer density, including helicopter surveys, trail cameras, harvest data, and emerging technologies like thermal imagery. These approaches have strengths and limitations based on forest conditions, terrain, season, budget, and management goals. As a result, foresters often rely on methods known to work best and usually try to combine multiple techniques to improve confidence. Mr. MacKenzie explained that DWSP is merging three different ways of looking at deer density. Numbers may vary, and the interpretation of results is just as important as the numbers themselves.

Mr. MacKenzie discussed the pellet group count method of deer density estimation, which DCR has utilized since 2015 at Quabbin Park. Pellet surveys are conducted after November 21st when most of the deciduous trees have shed their leaves, as pellets are more visible at that point and are not covered up by vegetation. Deposit rate can be a challenging variable and can influence the final density estimate. Mr. MacKenzie noted that this method is used to observe trends rather than provide hard numbers of how many deer are present. Prior to December 2023, DWSP had completed deer density estimations for seven years in a row using the pellet count method. The average number was 50 or 60 deer per square mile. Mr. MacKenzie reminded the Trust that any deer density greater than 20 deer per square mile has an impact on forest health and regeneration and is usually a good indicator that deer management is necessary.

Mr. MacKenzie explained that on August 2nd, 2024, a stakeholder meeting hosted by former DCR Commissioner Brian Arrigo and Rep. Todd Smola in Ware was held to address the validity of the pellet group methodology. Residents questioned whether pellet counts reflected what they personally observed in the park. As a result, DWSP agreed to undertake another independent study to obtain a better deer density estimate and partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (DOT) Aeronautics Division to use drones equipped with thermal infrared cameras over Quabbin Park. Mr. MacKenzie explained that this technology allows for autonomous flights over large, forested areas and makes warm-bodied animals stand out clearly against cooler backgrounds, especially in winter conditions. He noted that imagery can be collected as still photographs or video, in color, as thermal infrared, and in a variety of different resolutions.

The proposal to use drones on Water Supply lands and Quabbin Park was approved in mid-December. DWSP's proposal argued that drones equipped with these infrared sensors can significantly enhance deer population monitoring efforts, can survey an even larger area quickly, can provide even more accurate deer density estimates, and can survey at times when the public is not around and when deer are most active. As a result, flights were executed using two drones equipped with an infrared camera to capture high resolution photos and infrared at the same time. The 2,600-acre Quabbin Park was divided into 22 flight transects, and the drones were launched from Quabbin Tower to maintain visual contact to comply with federal aviation rules. Transects were 1,300 feet apart with zero overlap. The largest limiting factor was battery life.

Mr. MacKenzie presented an example of infrared deer imagery to the Trust. He discussed reliability and results. Last spring, the 2025 pellet survey density estimate for Quabbin Park was 26.8 deer per square mile, with a range of 19.9 to 52.5 deer per square mile. This year, DWSP carried out two pre-hunt flights on November 24th and December 1st. The 2025 drone pre-hunt survey estimate at Quabbin Park was 24.4 to 32.7 deer per square mile. The two-day controlled hunt at Quabbin Park took place on Monday, December 8th and Tuesday, December 9th, resulting in the harvest of 24 deer (which was about a six-deer-per-square-mile reduction), closely aligning with the pellet survey results. The post-hunt drone survey conducted on Wednesday, December 17th estimated the remaining density at 16 deer per square mile.

Another round of flights is planned for January 2026 to further refine the deer estimate. Mr. MacKenzie noted that this is all very recent data and expressed gratitude for the ability to partner with DOT on this project.

Trustee Rao expressed her enthusiasm for the infrared technology and noted how fascinating it is to be able to distinguish between various kinds of animals and woodland features. She asked Mr. MacKenzie what DCR considers to be an acceptable deer density. He responded that 20 deer per square mile is the goal, and anything higher than that is when impacts on forest regeneration occur. Mr. MacKenzie noted that he hopes to be able to use this technique in other parts of the reservoir watershed as well.

6. Update on FY2026 Spending

Mr. Scannell shared a Fiscal Year 2026 Expenditure Update (through November 2025, or 42% of the fiscal year) and proposal of a transfer of funds from one subsidiary to another.

o FY2026 Highlights –

- Annual vehicle and equipment purchases have begun to be delivered.
 - ❖ The Commonwealth Office of Vehicle Management (OVM) has put in place a new program where they are trying to accelerate replacement of vehicles. OVM will be replacing one vehicle this year and two next year at no cost to DWSP.
- Continued refinement of Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment.
- Annual Emergency Response Training continued.
- Successful Quabbin Permitted Deer Hunts continued.
- Continued work on EEA Forests as Climate Solutions initiative.
- DOT issued a Notice to Proceed in October for construction of the final Wachusett Reservoir direct discharge project along Route 110 in Sterling, MA.
- Equipment purchases occurred.
- Tributary water quality sampling continued weekly across all watersheds.
- Reservoir water quality sampling continued in both reservoirs.

- Aquatic invasive species surveys continued.
- **Expenditures** – About 34% total expended, nothing out of the ordinary for this time of the year.
- **Revenue** – Revenue is on-target for the year – about 65% of revenue collected. A large portion of that was from hydro & transmission, just under \$500,000.

Mr. Scannell discussed the proposed transfer of funds between subsidiaries, which includes a transfer of \$135,000 from the DD subsidiary (Pensions/Insurance) to the KK subsidiary (Equipment) for the purchase of a new office trailer for New Salem Crew Facility. He reminded the Trust that the original crew headquarters in New Salem was destroyed by a catastrophic fire in April 2018. DWSP crew spent the summer reporting there daily with no offices, and in the fall of 2018, DWSP was able to lease a used office trailer. The lease of that trailer has been considerable in cost at \$300,000. Mr. Scannell noted that the current contract is ending in early 2026, and the new contract rates are increasing, so DWSP would be paying close to \$70,000 annually for the rental of that trailer. The eventual goal is to have a permanent facility in New Salem. Staff investigated and have determined that DWSP can purchase a new trailer for \$135,000 of similar size and layout so that it can be used by staff until DWSP has a permanent facility constructed. Mr. Scannell noted that the new trailer would pay for itself in less than two years. After the construction of an office building, the trailer can be repurposed – a temporary office space for future construction projects (e.g., Admin reno) or conditioned storage space. Mr. Scannell explained that the request is to transfer money from the DD category. DD budget is a little heavy this year, because when the fringe rate was set at the end of last year, the rates were lower than what DWSP had been carrying in the budget. Also, because of the vacancies in DWSP, there is money in both AA and DD that has not been spent. Mr. Scannell emphasized that it would not be an impact in DD to be able to move those monies into the appropriate subsidiary to purchase a trailer.

Trustee Laskey questioned if Mr. Scannell is asking for approval. Mr. Scannell clarified that he is asking for the Board's approval – the finance rules DWSP has with the Trust is that they can only go over any subsidiary by \$100,000 or 10%, whichever is less, without a transfer. DWSP is asking the Board to approve a transfer of \$135,000 from the DD subsidiary to the KK subsidiary. Trustee Laskey called on Mr. Tom Durkin, MWRA Director of Finance, for input. Mr. Durkin noted that Mr. Scannell had sent the finance team (Mr. Michael Cole, MWRA Budget Director) an email on the issue, and they have agreed that the transfer seems prudent. Mr. Hammock echoed that sentiment. He followed up with a question regarding timeline for a permanent replacement, as it has been almost 10 years since the fire.

A motion was made by Trustee Heyes and seconded by Trustee Rao to approve the transfer. General Counsel Francisco-Murphy called the roll. The Trustees unanimously voted to approve the transfer.

7. Facility Updates

- a. **Quabbin Administration Roof** – Mr. Dan Clark, Quabbin/Ware Regional Director, shared an update on the Quabbin Administration Roof project.
 - Mr. Clark noted that progress has been made on the roof. DWSP first had to clear DCAMM to obtain authorization for the project. He noted that DWSP has also cleared the internal docket procedure which grants permission to post the request for contract quotes out to the list of contractors. Mr. Clark anticipates bidding and the award contract to take place this winter and early spring, and work will most likely begin in late spring/early summer.
- b. **Keystone Bridge** – Mr. Clark provided background information on the Keystone Bridge Stabilization Project at Quabbin.

- Built in the 1860s, the Keystone Bridge is one of the rarest and most significant dry-stone structures in the Quabbin watershed. No mortar was used in the construction of Keystone, which makes it unique across the state. Unfortunately, several years ago, significant changes to the bridge were noticed as the spandrel wall on the bridge’s downstream side began to collapse, which accelerated in 2021. There has been an ongoing effort to address the situation ever since.
- DCR first took the lead and brought in a consultant who provided an assessment of the bridge. Mr. Clark noted that Michael Weitzner, an expert dry stone waller, was contacted and hired by the Friends of Quabbin who made recommendations. Trees were removed. The consultant’s report emphasized the importance of stabilizing the collapsed spandrel wall. Mr. Clark explained that the Friends of Quabbin secured funding with a large portion of their own money. Construction began in fall 2025 through a local contractor. The stabilization phase of the project was recently completed in December 2025. The original budget was \$60,000, but the final cost to the Friends of Quabbin was \$120,000. Mr. Clark noted that the end result was well worth it and that the project was a great opportunity to collaborate with the Friends of Quabbin.

Trustee Laskey expressed his gratitude for all parties involved and thanked the Friends of Quabbin for their dedicated efforts.

- c. **Old Stone Church** – Ms. Kelley Freda, Regional Director of Wachusett/Sudbury, shared a brief presentation on the Old Stone Church project.
 - Over the years, it was noticed that the slope behind the Old Stone Church, located at 130 Beaman Street in West Boylston, was experiencing erosion which created a public safety issue. Ms. Freda discussed the popular landmark’s recent site improvements including shoreline stabilization along with walkway and planting upgrades. As one of DCR’s most photographed locations in the watershed, she noted the exciting opportunity to improve the walkway with native species and to beautify the area by adding infiltration and tree planting on the slope. Interpretive signage was replaced at the roadway, and new signs now include clearly stated prohibited activities with links to DCR’s website for more information on fishing access and permits.

Trustee Laskey expressed his support for the project and remarked that the team did a great job.

8. Miscellaneous

- Invasive Species Control – Herbicides
Trustee Laskey suggested this agenda item be moved to the March meeting to allow for in-depth discussion. Trustee Rao posed a question regarding invasive species control, and whether the Trust is looking for an update on DCR’s approach. Mr. Scannell provided brief background for clarification, noting that DWSP has had an Invasive Species Management Plan since 2012 and is writing an updated draft of that plan which is not available to the public at this point. He offered to provide an update to the Trust in March 2026. Trustee Laskey noted he has significant concerns regarding usage of herbicides in the watershed, and reiterated his desire to have an in-depth discussion on that topic in March. Trustee Rao requested a copy of the 2012 plan from Mr. Scannell to review the current approach.

9. Correspondence to the Trust

- December 10, 2025 email from Bill Pula
Mr. Bill Pula, Quabbin Watershed Advisory Committee (QWAC), stated that the topic of herbicides had been introduced in a recent QWAC meeting and noted that he has always opposed it. He discussed local

opposition to using herbicides on the watershed and explained that the old plan allowed for spot treatment of invasive species to be approved but that he does not approve of its usage on native species. Trustee Laskey agreed and expressed significant concerns about using herbicides. He suggested the Trust move the topic to the March 2026 meeting for a more in-depth discussion.

10. Other Updates

- Trustee Laskey noted that an additional agenda item regarding DCR Ranger enforcement should be moved to the March 2026 meeting. He then posed a question regarding revenue from writing tickets. Mr. Scannell responded that revenue used to go to the General Fund in the past when tickets were written. Trustee Rao clarified that this is not the case today, as DCR Rangers cannot currently issue tickets. Mr. Hammock emphasized the importance of upholding regulations with appropriate enforcement measures. He noted the urgency of this issue, explaining that it could cost ratepayers millions of dollars to filter if the watershed is not protected. He reiterated the importance of keeping a record of what is going on in the Quabbin (enforcement actions taken, name of offender, etc.) and requested an update in writing from the Commissioner's Office (in addition to the opinion of the General Counsel).
- Trustee Heyes expressed gratitude to Mr. MacKenzie and Mr. Brian Keevan for inviting him to their office for a review of their Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment computer programming and complimented their management. Additionally, Trustee Heyes noted concern for DCR staff regarding safety risk when interacting with the public on topic of issuing citations. Trustee Rao noted that Rangers still do not have the legal ability to issue citations as the law has changed and prevents DCR Rangers from engaging in policing. She expressed uncertainty as to what more the Trust could add to this topic, as legislature has decided that issuing citations is no longer a function of DCR Rangers. She suggested the Trust move on since there is no new development and noted that DCR is not seeing any egregious increase in violations. Trustee Rao further commended the DCR Rangers and emphasized that they are doing a great job engaging with the public.
- Mr. Hammock introduced the topic of the Quabbin Park Cemetery. He noted that just before Memorial Day, a dead tree fell over and damaged a few stones in the cemetery. He posed a question regarding preventive maintenance or a plan in place to fix the broken monuments. Mr. Hammock expressed concern for the responsibility of maintaining the cemetery and reiterated the need for a preventive maintenance program. Trustee Laskey acknowledged Mr. Hammock's concerns, noting that a significant amount of progress has been made on the cemetery and that work has moved in the right direction. He stated that the topic can be discussed more in-depth in the March 2026 meeting. Mr. Scannell offered an update to come in March.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting by Trustee Rao. The motion was seconded by Trustee Heyes. General Counsel Francisco-Murphy called the roll. **The Trustees unanimously voted to adjourn the meeting at 11:13am.**