

Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting
Thursday, March 10th, 2016
7:00 PM

Location: Franklin Wood Studio, 232A Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543 (Behind Police/Fire Station)

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

Massachusetts Council of Sportsmen: Robert Carey, William Label

Alternate: Mike Moss

Worcester County League of Sportsmen: **John Root**

Alternate: Dave Papale

Trout Unlimited: **Jeffrey Schaaf (Co-Chairman)**

Alternate:

A Rod and Gun Club: Joe Cataldo

Alternate: Brian Waterman

Barre Selectboard: Martha Varnot

Alternate: **Edward Yaglou**

Hubbardston Selectboard: **Thomas Bratko**

Alternate:

Oakham Selectmen: Thomas Hughes

Alternate: **Phillip Warbasse**

Rutland Selectmen: Charles R. Williams

Alternate: **Brett Russ**

Barre Historical Society: Peg Frost

Alternate:

Hubbardston Historical Society:

Alternate:

Oakham Historical Society: Wes Dwelly

Alternate: **Bill Mucha**

Rutland Historical Society: **Helen Viner**

Alternate: Tim Nahrwold

Massachusetts Wildlife Federation: Bill Westaway (Co-Chairman)

Alternate: Thomas Berube

Massachusetts Audubon Society: **Martha Gach**

Alternate:

Sierra Club: Matt Hopkinson

Alternate:

Upper Ware River Watershed Association: **Donald Rich**

Alternate: **Edward Yaglou**

General Public: Mark DuBois

Alternate: Dave Small

DCR Staff Present:

Justin Gonsor, Bill Pula

Members of the Public Present:

Lydia Barter, Christine Besean (spelling?), Bill Dobson, Margo Petracone, Chris Stark, Heidi Waugh, Dean Zuppio

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Start Time: 7:03 PM

Approval of Minutes of Meeting on January 21st, 2016

The minutes for the meeting on January 21st, 2016 were unanimously approved.

Friends of the Ware River Watershed - discussion

Brett Russ gave a presentation about the concept of starting a Friends of the Ware River Watershed (FWRW) group and what that would entail. Benefits of starting the FWRW could include:

- foster collaboration
- improve the relationship between the public (the people that use the watershed) and the state (the people that manage the watershed) in the Ware River Watershed (WRW)
- mission to balance responsible recreation with the primary purpose of the watershed; water supply protection.

They would like to have all user groups, the unaffiliated public, and the DCR represented on the board. Some of the main goals of the group could include:

- help to balance sustainable trail access for non-motorized trail users while insuring that water purity is not compromised
- trail stewardship and maintenance – erosion problems; bridge maintenance
- assist in monitoring for and reporting unauthorized activities

- education and community outreach on protecting the cultural, environmental and historic watershed resources through partnerships with other local and regional groups
- qualify for grant money for projects

Some thoughts on how the group would function include:

- regular meetings with citizens and DCR to discuss issues
- assist in communication between DCR and the public
 - communicate issues found
 - communicate upcoming forest management and what roads and trails are affected
 - communicate work days and seasonal closures
 - communicate changes to regulations and why
- harness social media and the energies and passions of local citizens

As of March 10, 2016 143 people have signed up to receive the FWRW newsletter via <http://warewatershed.org> and 158 people have signed up at <http://facebook.com/warewatershed>. A modest initial project was proposed that would designate a few “stacked loops” of watershed roads open to all non-motorized users. These loops would then be marked with small and simple signs. This could aid in keeping people on authorized trails as well as prevent people from getting lost. The group believes that the more people who access the WRW legitimately, the less illegitimate activity will take place.

Margo Petracone commented that she concerned that she hadn’t heard about the FWRW before and asked about how people initially heard about the group and how to join. Brett Russ mentioned that the FWRW has held a couple public meetings to communicate the rules of the watershed to the public. At this point, FWRW hasn’t been in direct communication with other user groups with invitations to join; they were looking to get the input from the WRWAC and DCR first.

Martha Gach talked about the need to attain 501c3 status as a non-governmental organization (NGO) if the group would like to apply for grants in the future.

Bill Pula talked about the process by which the advisory committees and Friends of Quabbin (FOQ) were originally created through the state legislature; how their roles and membership were defined. FWRW would have to negotiate with DCR directly if they were looking for similar official status.

Tom Bratko talked about how the Hubbardston/Mt. Jefferson conservation area is preparing to close their location to bicycling because of erosion and extensive unauthorized trail building. He has seen extensive damage within the past couple years from unauthorized trails and supports banning mountain bicycling on watershed lands.

Jeff Schaaf talked about the importance of the FWRW to have a diverse membership base of varied user groups; not just people concerned with mountain bike access.

Ed Yaglou asked for about how the Quabbin Watershed Advisory Committee (QWAC) interacts with the FOQ group. Bill Pula mentioned that the FOQ has a member on the QWAC board. The FOQ sell books, maps, etc. in the Quabbin Visitor Center to raise funds but their main focus is to increase public awareness and appreciation of the natural and historical resources of the reservation.

Bill Pula mentioned that DCR-DWSP is currently under order from DEP to have a compliance and enforcement strategy in place by April 1st to address the unauthorized trail issue in the WRW.

Helen Viner talked about why the Quabbin and Ware River Watersheds were originally formed; water supply protection. She feels that increased access over the years has seemed to turn it more into a park/recreation area. She appreciates the access that is allowed but understands restrictions on activities that DCR deem not appropriate in a watershed.

A member of the public commented that the local bicyclists that live in the area are doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, etc.; they support the community. She mentioned that mountain biking is a growing sport and hoped DCR could examine the issue more closely and allow some off-road bicycling in the WRW.

Bill Dobson commented that the forming of the FWRW could become an avenue to fix some of the damage done by unauthorized trail building.

Margo Petracone asked for a brief statement about what the FWRW would like to accomplish and which user groups they would like to get together with. Brett

Russ answered that the intent is to bring users of the watershed together, with the state, to collaborate together to solve the unauthorized trail problem.

Don Rich thought that most of the things the FWRW are proposing are already addressed by the WRWAC; trail maintenance, signage, etc. Brett Russ thought the FWRW could better harness the public's energy to help DCR.

Martha Gach thought the concepts about educating the public on the rules and regulations of the watershed are admirable. She supports getting more people involved in governing and managing watersheds but also felt that it was important that the group have a varied user base, not just made up of people concerned with mountain bike access.

Helen Viner questioned how the group would deal with enforcement of regulations. Brett Russ envisioned the group reporting any violations they find to the watershed rangers; being eyes and ears in the forest.

Bill Pula talked about the other watershed violation issues DCR deals with: locks being cut, illegal dumping, etc. He also talked about how the creation of unauthorized trails in the WRW has increased over the past 5 or so years.

Bill Dobson commented on the T3 trail. He stated that the 80 trail number has been proven by DCR to be grossly in error and has documentation to prove it.

Helen Viner questioned if the FWRW would be enthusiastic about forming this group and conducting trail maintenance; if they would be willing to follow the rules and regulations of the watershed. Brett Russ thought that following existing regulations shouldn't be a problem. He would like to sit down with DCR with maps to determine which roads are open to which activities, seasonal closings, etc., as it can get confusing. Bill Pula mentioned that all roads are open to bicycling; however, some of those roads are maintained more than others.

There was discussion over what needs to be done for the FWRW to be officially recognized and work with DCR. Bill Pula commented that a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) would have to first be negotiated between FWRW and DCR. Liability issues would also have to be considered if trail maintenance will be part of the group's activities.

Ed Yaglou mentioned that he would like to see a greater diversity of user groups represented by the FWRW. A member of the public agreed with that statement.

Bill Mucha read DCR-DWSP's policy of bicycle access in the WRW which states, "DCR-Watershed allows bicycle access on open DCR roads and on rail trails within DCR water supply lands in the Ware River Watershed. DCR prohibits off-road bicycling, bicycling on any footpaths (i.e. single track riding), bicycling on forestry operation's skid roads, and bicycling on unauthorized roads or trails. In addition, DCR restricts bicycling during the "mud-season" (April-May) when DCR closes roads with locked gates or bar-ways, during watershed management operations, and during other situations which are posted."

Quabbin Island Rattlesnake Proposal - discussion

A 5-minute video was played for the committee which features Tom French, assistant Director of MassWildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, discussing the timber rattlesnake conservation proposal at Quabbin Reservoir. That video, as well as additional information on timber rattlesnake conservation can be found at <http://www.mass.gov/dfw/timber-rattlesnake-conservation>.

Highlights from the video are as follows:

- rattlesnakes are one of the most imperiled species in MA
- Why does MassWildlife care?
 - It is their statutory responsibility to restore and conserve all biodiversity in the state
- What's the plan for Quabbin?
 - The proposal to release rattlesnakes on an island at Quabbin has evolved out of a necessity of having at least one place in the state as a safety net for rattlesnakes; a place where they can be safe from people.
 - The largest island at Quabbin was chosen; Mt Zion; 1,300 acres; 3.5 miles long. Mt. Zion unique habitat features that rattlesnakes require; they need a deep den site in order to survive over winter.
 - If they were to swim off the island, which is unlikely, there's no winter den site on the mainland close enough to get to and they would die over the winter.

- The approach will be to take juvenile snakes born in the wild in MA and head start them (keep them in captivity until they are big enough to have a relatively high chance of survival in the wild) before releasing them on Mt. Zion.
- Releases won't happen for another 2-3 years.
- Some media outlets have reported 150 snakes will be released. Is that true?
 - False, it was a misquote
 - There is probably less than 200 rattlesnakes total across MA so there isn't a source for very many juvenile snakes to head start for release.
 - The projection is to have between 1-10 snakes a year to release once the program is up and running.
- Should the public be concerned for their safety?
 - Timber rattlesnakes are a venomous species. Today, with modern anti-venom treatments available, they aren't nearly as dangerous as they have been historically.
 - The reality is that hundreds of thousands of people visit our parks where we have our remaining rattlesnake populations and they don't get bit; their dogs don't get bit.
 - The people who do get bit in this state are people that are illegally catching them, handling them, or harassing them, and none of those bites have been life threatening.
 - People in the public have been safe, but the snakes have suffered. We are losing snakes faster in MA over the past 30 years than ever before.

Phil Warbasse commented that Mt. Zion does have a causeway (baffle dams) that links the island to the mainland. Bill Pula responded that the release/den site for the rattlesnakes is on the complete north side of Zion, about 3.5 miles north of the baffle dams; the snakes are unlikely to travel that distance. John Root confirmed that rattlesnakes need for a deep hibernacula to survive over winter. He also talked about how a male only travels about 2.5 miles away from their den site, which is shorter than the length of Mt. Zion. He also confirmed that if they did swim to shore, there is no hibernacula close by. As a result, the snakes would have no way to survive over winter on the mainland.

There was discussion on the merits of trying to conserve rattlesnakes in MA; whether it is a worthy cause or not.

Don Rich talked about his numerous personal experiences with many species of snakes in the state of Florida. He saw no problem with the rattlesnake proposal.

Hubbardston Soil Infill Project - discussion

Tom Bratko updated the committee on a program by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to move contaminated soils out of Boston. Boston passed a law saying that the soils can't be put in the city of Boston, so they need to look elsewhere. DEP is looking to place between 3-15 million yards of untreated, contaminated soils in the sand pits in the northern part of Hubbardston. The site is outside of the WRW. The technical term for these materials is RS1 soils and RS2 soils. DEP guarantees that the soils are safe and shouldn't pose any problems. They are proposing to pay the town of Hubbardston \$1/yard and the owner of the land \$4/yard.

Tom Bratko made a motion that DCR give the committee a written opinion indicating whether or not DCR-DWSP would allow RS1 or RS2 soils from the Boston area to infill areas within the Coen Bill Catchment area in the WRW. The motion was withdrawn shortly after and not voted on.

Bill Pula commented that RS1 soils are not contaminated by definition; measured levels would be below the trigger amounts used to define contamination. There is also a regulation which states that there cannot be any alteration to a tributary that is regulated under the Watershed Protection Act; alterations would include infill. DCR won't be giving an opinion on the issue.

Mt. Jefferson / Malone Road Trail Proposal - update

Bill Pula commented that DCR currently isn't approving any new trails in the WRW until the unauthorized trail issues improve. He was in contact with Jim French and was told that the conservation easement on that property doesn't allow for the creation of more trails either.

DCR has been tasked by DEP with creating a compliance and enforcement plan to stop the development of illegal trails in the WRW by April 1st. Each year there is a watershed inspection as a condition of DCR's filtration waiver.

Jeff Schaaf asked for clarification on what DEP is asking for. Bill Pula answered that the plan will focus on how to best stop the building and use of illegal trails in the WRW.

The committee would like to see a copy of the plan when it is available.

Member Issues

Bill Pula handed out a set of photos to the committee members highlighting work that was done at the old prison camp graveyard. The DCR crew cleaned up the site, cut back brush, etc. Those photos are attached at the end of these minutes.

Ed Yaglou informed everyone that Burt Frost recently passed away. He was a WRWAC member who represented the Barre Historical Society.

Bill Pula commented that the plan is to have the Ware River Forestry Lot proposals for FY17 presented at the next meeting.

Meeting End Time: 8:23 PM

Upcoming WRWAC Meetings

- Thursday, May 26th, 2016 at 7 PM – Franklin Wood Studio, 232A Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543 (Behind Police/Fire Station)



Endangered Timber Rattlesnake Conservation Includes Introduction on Quabbin Island

The Timber Rattlesnake is listed as an Endangered Species in Massachusetts and has experienced the greatest modern decline of any native reptile. It is a high conservation priority species for the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, (MassWildlife) the agency with the legal responsibility and mandate to conserve endangered and common wildlife species. Currently, there are only five populations of Timber Rattlesnakes in the Commonwealth. As part of an overall conservation strategy, MassWildlife is proposing to establish a small number of rattlesnakes on Mount Zion, a large island closed to the public at the Quabbin Reservoir in central Massachusetts.

Native to Massachusetts, the Timber Rattlesnake has lived here continuously long before European settlement. Humans are the greatest threat to the Timber Rattlesnake. While killing or disturbing this snake is a serious criminal offense, these acts, combined with road mortality, continue to be major factors that contribute to the rattlesnake's imperiled status. The proposal to establish a small discrete population of Timber Rattlesnakes at the Quabbin Reservoir has evolved out of the need to have at least one location in Massachusetts where this native endangered species will avoid people.



Snakes used for this project will be offspring of Massachusetts snakes. Juvenile snakes will be headstarted in captivity by the Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence, RI for two winters allowing them to grow large enough so that they will have the best chance of surviving to adulthood. While rattlesnakes are perfectly good swimmers, this island is large enough that they would have little motivation to swim away. Even if the snakes did swim, they would pose no measurable risk to the public, considering rattlesnakes have long lived in popular state parks and wildlife lands heavily used by people elsewhere in Massachusetts.

Throughout human history, snakes of all types have been feared, maligned, and persecuted. Because the Timber Rattlesnake is venomous, people express understandable concerns for their safety and the safety of family members and pets. As a venomous snake, the Timber Rattlesnake certainly has the potential to be dangerous, but the reality is that there has been no public harm. Timber Rattlesnakes are generally mild in disposition and often rattle their tails to alert animals and people. Wild bites to people (who don't deliberately handle or disturb a rattlesnake) are extremely rare. Most modern bites occur as the result of irresponsible (and illegal) activities that involve handling or harassing the animals. The latest antivenin treatments have greatly reduced the danger even if a person is bitten.

The Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, the agency with the legal mandate and scientific expertise is working hard to ensure that this imperiled and fascinating snake does not finally disappear almost 400 years after European settlement.

**Learn more: Mass.gov/dfw/timber-rattlesnake-conservation
Mass.gov/dfw/timber-rattlesnake-facts**

The Timber Rattlesnake in Massachusetts History



The Timber Rattlesnake figures prominently in the Commonwealth's early history as a symbol of strength. In 1622, Chief Canonicus of the Narragansetts sent arrows bound in a rattlesnake skin (likely from the Blue Hills) to Governor Winthrop as a challenge for war. The Governor returned the rattlesnake skin filled with powder and shot with a message of defiance. The familiar Gadsden Flag with a coiled Timber Rattlesnake and the words "DON'T TREAD ON ME" was designed in 1775 for use in the American Revolution and was later used by the Continental Marines.

www.mass.gov/masswildlife

Division of Fisheries and Wildlife
Field Headquarters, One Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough, MA 01581 (508) 389-6300

