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Connecticut River Watershed Council calls on MWRA to take care of donor watersheds first

Greenfield, MA, June 29, 2006 – Approximately 60 people attended a forum at the Charlestown Navy Yard on Wednesday to weigh in on the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority's (MWRA's) pending decision whether or not to market and make available up to 36 million gallons per day of drinking water to new communities in Massachusetts. The proposal drew opinions from several sides of the issue, but many of the attendees at Wednesday's forum expressed disagreement or caution about the proposal. Among them, the Connecticut River Watershed Council spoke about taking care of the donor basin first, before selling off more water. Others expressed concerns about development and sprawl. All agreed that this is a big decision that has state-wide consequences.

The MWRA supplies drinking water to 2.2 million residents in Massachusetts and 5,500 industrial users. The primary source of drinking water comes from the Quabbin Reservoir, which was created in the 1930s by damming the Swift River and moving the residents of four entire towns. Water travels eastward by aqueduct from the Quabbin Reservoir to the Wachusett Reservoir and on to many communities in the metropolitan Boston area. The Swift River is part of the Connecticut River watershed -- it drains into the Chicopee River and then to the Connecticut. The Wachusett Reservoir is part of the Nashua River watershed.

Years of successful water conservation efforts have meant that MWRA customers are using less water now than they have for decades. Rainfall has been plentiful lately, and the reservoirs are at 100% capacity. Recently, a proposal to expand revenue for the MWRA by selling off some of its so-called "excess" water has been gaining momentum within the MWRA. They maintain that expanding their service area to communities that use groundwater wells in stressed watersheds, like the Ispwich River and the upper Charles River, could produce an environmental benefit. But the environmental community is saying "not so fast."

“The water that has been saved belongs to the public and is not the MWRA’s to sell. Conserved water should first be used to make stream flows in the donor watersheds more ‘natural,’” says Andrea Donlon, River Steward for the Connecticut River Watershed Council. “The Swift River has the potential to be a world-class trout fishery, which would bring tourists to the area and add to the local economy. Water sent downstream could make modest improvements to water quality in the Chicopee and Connecticut Rivers, which are impaired water bodies. Any water quality improvements could also help the local economies of Chicopee, Springfield, and Holyoke, which have been trying to clean up their sewage problems and reconnect citizens to these rivers. Benefits of conservation should go to the donor areas first, before turning around and selling the saved water.”

More than 75 years ago, the War Department (now the US Army Corps of Engineers) wrote a permit to require minimum releases to the Swift River from Quabbin Reservoir. These releases remain in effect today, and were designed to maintain navigation in the Connecticut River at Hartford, CT. This means that during the typically dry parts of the summer when the Connecticut River levels at a monitoring gage in Montague decline, releases from the Quabbin Reservoir are required to go up. “There is no seasonality in the Swift River,” says Donlon, who notes that seasonal changes can provide important environmental cues to fish and other critters in and near the river. “Before the Winsor dam was put in, flow rates in the Swift River typically ranged between 50 cubic feet per second (cfs) and 1,000 cfs, with dramatic spikes upward during floods. Now, there are very few floods and no droughts in the Swift River. Flows are steady, and are typically around 30 cfs or 150 cfs during the some parts of the summer. This year, flows are high (200-700 cfs) because water has been spilling over the dam, which is good, but the flow rates have typically been quite steady.”

Others have expressed concern over the effect such a decision would have on development throughout the Commonwealth. In an op-ed piece in Tuesday’s Boston Globe, Peter Shelley of the Conservation Law Foundation and Martin Pillsbury of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council wrote, “Where water goes, development will follow -- lots of development -- houses, apartments, malls, and office parks, most of them far from existing public infrastructure. The public will have to lay new water and sewer pipes right away, and in five or 10 years, the state will be asked to pay for all the additional infrastructure needed to support the new development, including wider and longer roads, public transit, and expensive new schools -- all with taxpayers' dollars.” Many others pointed out to the MWRA Board of Directors on Thursday that a plan to market more water is inconsistent with one of the main principles of the state’s new Water Policy: “Keep water local and seek to have municipalities live within their water budgets by addressing issues from a watershed perspective.” Indeed, the enabling legislation for the MWRA stresses that interbasin transfers of water (moving water from one watershed to another) should be a last resort.

After the forum ended on Thursday, the MWRA board voted to increase their rates by an average of 4.9%. Significant capital expenditures and rising electricity costs mean that the rates are likely to keep increasing in the foreseeable future. How or when the MWRA will proceed on a decision to expand its service area and market water to new communities has not been made public.

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For more information on this issue:

- 1) Eileen Simonson of the Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee in Hadley. Has long history of advising the MWRA, attended forum and spoke. (413) 586-8861
- 2) Kimberly Noake-McPhee of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments. Attended forum and spoke on behalf of Franklin County region: (413) 774-1194 x103.
- 3) MWRA web page summary of issue:
<http://www.mwra.state.ma.us/01news/2006/060906WtrNotice.htm>
- 4) Charles River Watershed Association web page summarizing their position:
<http://www.crwa.org/index.html?alert/MWRAexpansion.html&2>