



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

Allison Fore

Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Officer

312.751.6633

allison.fore@mwrdd.org

100 East Erie Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611

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MWRD partners with Friends of the Chicago River to promote Overflow Action Days

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) Board of Commissioners welcomed Friends of the Chicago River (Friends) Executive Director Margaret Frisbie to their March 16 Board meeting to present Friends with a resolution in support of Overflow Action Days.

Friends launched the Overflow Action Days initiative in 2016 to educate area residents to use less water at home when weather forecasts predict significant rain, thus giving sewers more capacity to handle rain.

Heavy storms can stress older Chicago area sewer systems, causing a combined sewer overflow (CSO) in the systems that are not separate. This CSO is a mixture of rain water and sewage that spills into the waterways. Very large rain events can lead to the release of combined sewage into Lake Michigan, which negatively impacts water quality.

There are large projects underway to reduce these overflows. The MWRD's Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, or TARP, was started in 1972 and designed to improve the water quality in area rivers, protect Lake Michigan and provide an outlet for floodwaters. The 109 miles of tunnels have been in full operation since 2006, and can hold 2.3 billion gallons of water. Two reservoirs holding a combined 8.25 billion gallons have dramatically reduced the occurrence of basement backups and combined sewer overflows. In fact, in 2016, there was only one CSO in the Calumet River System; this can be attributed to the Thornton Composite Reservoir being completed in late 2015.

In 2017, Phase 1 of the McCook Reservoir, the last component of TARP, will add 3.5 billion gallons of storage. Phase 2 of McCook will add another 6.5 billion gallons of storage capacity in 2029, making it the largest CSO reservoir in the world.

"TARP has been an engineering marvel since its beginning," said MWRD President Mariyana Spyropoulos. "Before we know it, CSOs could become a thing of the past."



In the photo (L-R): MWRD Commissioner Debra Shore, Friends of the Chicago River's Joanne So Young Dill, Andrew Donakowski, and Margaret Frisbie and President Mariyana Spyropoulos show the resolutions dedicated to Overflow Action Days.

While TARP is reducing water pollution, it cannot accomplish this stewardship alone. If residents keep water from entering the water treatment system, there will be more space in the sewers to accommodate rain water.

Based on the concept of Ozone Action Days, Overflow Action alerts are sent to remind people to conserve water before and during rain events. Actions such as delaying showers or reducing their duration, flushing less, and waiting to run the dishwasher can help reduce the amount of water in the sewer system.

"April showers bring May flowers and every drop of water counts, which is why we are encouraging everyone to join us in April for Overflow Action Month," said Frisbie. "If we can get 50,000 people to cut back their water use by 20 gallons a day it would save one million gallons of fresh clean water daily. If 500,000 people do it, we save 10 times that—which would equal 3.65 billion gallons of water a year. Every drop that we can save makes the river safer for the people and wildlife that use and depend on it."

Learn more at chicagoriver.org and www.mwrdd.org.

Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

Established in 1889, the MWRD (www.mwrdd.org) is an award-winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.