

2023

# MERRIMACK RIVER COLLABORATIVE ANNUAL REPORT



# WORKING RIVER WIDE

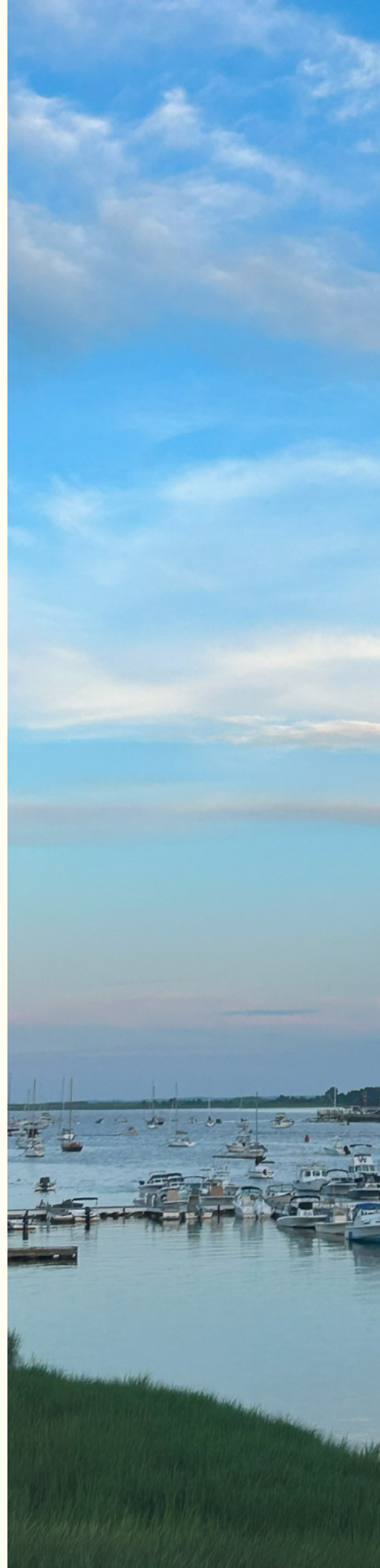
The Merrimack River Collaborative (MRC) celebrates its inaugural year working to monitor, improve, and restore water quality to their namesake river.

The Collaborative, led through a working group comprised of technical experts, regional planners, and elected officials, has worked this year to hold regular meetings, write and file legislation, secure funding for advancements in water quality monitoring, and provide educational opportunities for the greater Merrimack region. These endeavors have helped rejuvenate local, regional, and state interest in the Merrimack River as an essential yet threatened natural resource.

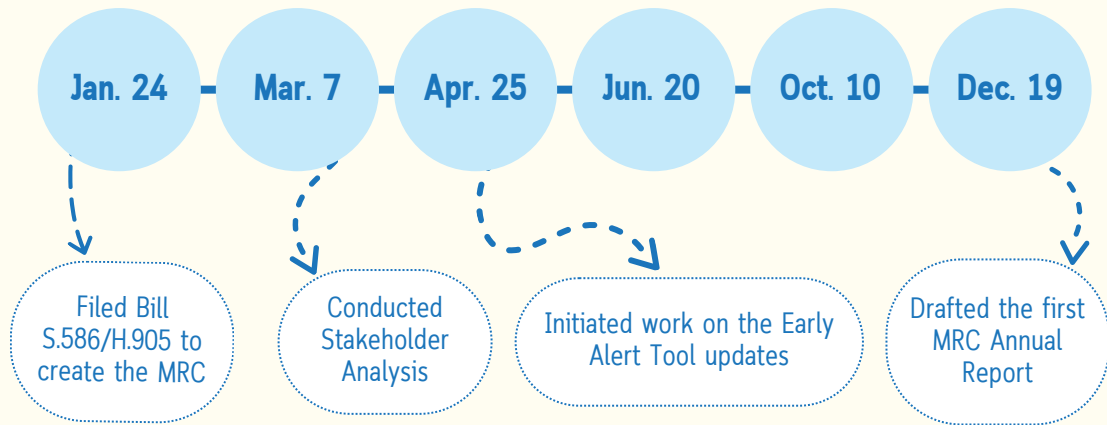
As our attention shifts to 2024, we are excited to focus on developing comprehensive web resources, centralizing water quality data, hosting educational and information sharing events, and ultimately facilitating inter-organizational collaboration to bring about positive change in our watershed.

## OUR MEMBERS

Senator Bruce Tarr, First Essex and Middlesex  
Representative Dawne Shand, First Essex  
Representative Ryan Hamilton, 15th Essex  
Mayor Sean Reardon, Newburyport MA  
Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC)  
Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG)  
Merrimack River Watershed Council (MRWC)  
Alliance of Climate and Environmental Stewards (ACES)



# 2023 CONVENING OF THE MRC



## 2023 EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

- 4.22 Newburyport Earth Day Celebration
- 4.26 Testified for Bill S.586/H.905
- 6.14 MassBays Annual Meeting Presentation
- 9.26 Newburyport High School Intern & Career Fair
- 10.25 Public Hearing on CSO overflow Bill
- 10.25 Storm Surge Event Presentation
- Merrimack River CSO Presentations to:
  - 5.16 Plum Island Surfcasters Club
  - 8.15 Public Library Consortium
  - 10.4 Greater Newburyport Chamber of Commerce
  - 11.13 Team Haverhill

## 2023 MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



[The Merrimack River Collaborative](#) MVPC

[Local leaders push for creation of Merrimack River Collaborative](#) Newburyport Daily News

[CSOs and what is being done](#) Newburyport Daily News

[Collaborative public action needed to clean up the Merrimack](#) ACES

[Merrimack river experienced record discharge in 2023](#) Eagle Tribune

# PLANNING AND COLLABORATION

★ **BILL H.905**  
193rd (Current)

## AN ACT TO CREATE A MERRIMACK RIVER COLLABORATIVE

By Representative Shand of Newburyport and Senator Tarr, a joint petition (accompanied by bill, House, No. 905) of Dawne Shand and Bruce E. Tarr for legislation to establish a Merrimack River collaborative. Environment and Natural Resources.

 [View Text](#)

**Presenters:** [Dawne Shand](#) , [Bruce E. Tarr](#)

 [Print Preview](#)

**Status:** Referred to [House Committee on Ways and Means](#)

 [Download PDF](#)

## STATE LEGISLATION

In the most recent legislative session, Senator Bruce Tarr and Representative Dawne Shand introduced legislation aimed at formalizing the MRC. The bill, known as S.586/H.905 - An Act to Create a Merrimack River Collaborative, was referred to the Joint Committee on the Environment and Natural Resources. On April 19th, 2023, it underwent a hearing and received a favorable recommendation. Progressing swiftly, the bill was reported out favorably and has been advanced to the committee on House Ways and Means.

## SWOT ANALYSIS

Following its establishment, the MRC promptly embarked on conducting an initial SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis for its four focus areas: planning and collaboration, standardization and monitoring, outreach and engagement, and funding.

This exercise proved pivotal in shaping the direction of the MRC's activities. The accomplishments of 2023 and the forthcoming goals, in alignment with the SWOT analysis, are detailed in Appendix A of this report.

## INTER-ORGANIZATION COLLABORATION

The MRC heavily depends on the cooperation of partner organizations, who willingly gather to exchange pertinent information and perspectives on the most urgent issues facing the Merrimack River. In the current year, our group has benefited from insights provided by legislative partners, local government officials, technical experts, and education and outreach groups situated along the lower half of the Merrimack River. Looking ahead, the MRC is enthusiastic about the prospect of broadening this coalition to include stakeholders from the upper Merrimack region and supporting a multi-state collaboration to adopt a holistic approach to watershed planning and management.

---

# STANDARDIZATION AND MONITORING



MRWC water monitoring volunteers and staff: Mike LaBonte, Deanna Mcguinness, Daniel Skorupka, and Jose Tapia

---

## MAINSTEM & TRIBUTARY MONITORING PROGRAM

The Merrimack River Watershed Council worked on three projects using local volunteers to monitor for water quality in the Merrimack River and two of its tributaries (the Spicket and Shawsheen Rivers). While all three projects focused on sampling for fecal coliform, the Spicket River project also included phosphorus testing to develop a watershed-based plan compliant with the State's 319 non-point source grant program. This plan was submitted to the State at the end of 2023. Additionally, the Shawsheen River included dissolved oxygen monitoring for its own watershed-based plan to be submitted in late 2024. Once finalized, data will be posted to MRWC's [Interactive Water Quality Dashboard](#).

Funding for water quality monitoring was provided by Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Partnership, under EPA grant number 00A01085-0. Additional funding for watershed planning was provided by a 604b Water Quality Management Planning Grant and a Section 319 Non-Point Source Competitive Grant.

---

## WATER QUALITY ROUNDTABLE

In an effort to grow partnerships, share knowledge, and strengthen collective action, the Merrimack River Water Quality Roundtable was born. Coordinated by the Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Partnership (MassBays), the first two meetings in 2021 and 2022 provided the opportunity for practitioners and monitors of the river to convene, share findings, and identify priorities for growth and collaboration. MVPC and MRWC are excited to be stepping in to support this effort as we look ahead to our Third Annual Merrimack River Water Quality Roundtable this spring. Through continuing to convene groups across the multi-state watershed, we hope to create paths for continued and resilient management of our vital and shared resource.

---

# OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

## INTEREST GROUP PRESENTATIONS

---

In August, the Merrimack River Watershed Council presented a slideshow on Merrimack River CSO issues to members of the region's public library consortium. Over 400 signed up for the event. Similar presentations were given to the Greater Newburyport Chamber of Commerce, Team Haverhill, and Plum Island Surfcasters Club. Funding for outreach and educational activities provided by the M&T Charitable Foundation's Amplify Fund.

## STORM SURGE PANEL

---

John Macone (MRWC) and Hanna Mogensen (MVPC) participated on the Storm Surge Panel held in Newburyport in October. The panel discussion focused on the growing need for regional cooperation to address common interests. The Merrimack River was a major point of focus during the discussion, elevating concerns around CSOs, water quality, and funding. Through collaborations like the MRC, our region continues to strive to bring attention and action to our most pressing needs.



MRWC's John Macone, Ipswich River Watershed

Association's Erin Bony-Casey, and MVPC's Hanna Mogensen

## EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

---

In 2023 ACES sponsored an intern to conduct a more detailed reexamination of the Merrimack River User Survey focusing on 9 metropolitan communities in Lawrence and Lowell, MA and in Nashua and Manchester, NH. This work addressed questions being raised regarding identification of overall, community-based land and water use, conservation, and management goals.



ACES public outreach event in Newburyport

## PUBLIC OUTREACH

---

ACES helped to organize the Newburyport Earth Day Celebration and High School Internship & Career Fair. At both events, ACES hosted several booths, including a table addressing the health of the Merrimack River, a display of the MRWC's physical model of the watershed, Results from the Merrimack River User Survey, and opportunities for youth involvement in ACES and ally programs.

---

# FUNDED PROJECTS

## EARLY ALERT TOOL

---

The Merrimack Valley Planning Commission has been awarded funding from the State's Community Compact Cabinet Regionalization and Efficiency Grant Program to enhance their Combined Sewage Overflow (CSO) monitoring tool. This "early alert tool", which will consist of an AI-powered model and online dashboard, will play a critical role in predicting water quality downstream of Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTPs) after CSO events and assessing the associated risk level for residents interacting with the river. This resource will aid municipal Boards of Health in adhering to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) legislation regarding mandatory postings at public access points to the Merrimack River after CSO events. To learn more about the Early Alert Tool, [click here](#).

## COMBINED SEWAGE OVERFLOWS

---



The Merrimack River Watershed Council has been awarded funding from the Legislature and State Department of Environmental Protection to help develop regional solutions to the Merrimack River's CSOs. This funding will go toward a variety of projects aimed at providing new scientific data about Merrimack River CSO events, investigating new technology for improved bacteria testing and outreach.



# APPENDIX A: SWOT ANALYSIS

Efforts surrounding the Merrimack River and associated water quality degradation were at the forefront of public interest in 2023. To date, many efforts to monitor and improve the Merrimack River's water quality have been conducted. However, efforts remain disjointed, indicating a need to reconvene a watershed-wide working group to wholistically address improving water quality in the river. The convening of a multidisciplinary group of experts to guide this work is an essential step to advance this effort. Given that state and federal funding has been made available for water quality efforts, public interest is strong, and there is increased concern for the river's health as climactic variables shift, this is a strategically ideal time to reconvene this group and advance the discussion surrounding water quality in the Merrimack River.

Below is a subset of the SWOT completed in December 2023 by the MRC, that highlights accomplishments and forthcoming actions as it relates to the MRC's four focus areas: Planning and Collaboration, Outreach and Engagement, Standardization and Monitoring, and Funded Projects. If you are interested in viewing the comprehensive SWOT analysis, please contact [enviro@mvpc.org](mailto:enviro@mvpc.org).

	Accomplished 	Advancing 
Planning & Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MRC re-established with monthly meetings of key stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Broaden MRC engagement</li> <li>Explore values across watershed</li> <li>Capitalize on political support</li> <li>Advance vision for united watershed approach</li> </ul>
Outreach & Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gain support of key stakeholders</li> <li>Elevate CSOs as key priority</li> <li>Engage media outlets</li> <li>Engage river users</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leverage network to gain public support and build momentum</li> <li>Build capacity for local Boards of Health</li> <li>Educate users on watershed health</li> <li>Engage elected officials</li> </ul>
Standardization & Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with local Boards of Health to advance Early Alert Tool</li> <li>Conduct annual mainstem and tributary monitoring programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advance baseline &amp; long-term water quality monitoring</li> <li>Create/promote publicly accessible platform for water quality reporting</li> <li>Integrate climate change measurements into monitoring</li> </ul>
Funding & Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use DLTA funds to assist communities with water quality efforts</li> <li>Leverage regional projects and funding to sustain ongoing water quality efforts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek out funding to support long-term water quality monitoring</li> <li>Identify long-term funding for MRC</li> <li>Actively pursue funding to advance MRC priorities</li> <li>Identify and leverage adjacent project opportunities</li> </ul>



# LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024

With our first year complete, the MRC is looking ahead to 2024. To continue advancing our goals, we strive to finalize Bill S.586/H.905- An act to Create a Merrimack River Collaborative to formally establish the MRC as a coordinating entity for the watershed. With an official designation, we are eager to broaden our reach through expanding partnerships across our northern border to include representation from New Hampshire. Through individual efforts and collective action, we aim to continue advancing standardization and monitoring efforts across the river, including development and distribution of our Early Alert Tool. We seek to continue cultivating opportunities for outreach and engagement of legislators, practitioners, and community members through events, including the Merrimack River Water Quality Roundtable. Additionally, through all measures, we aim to leverage collaboration to bring more resources to our river, and the communities that depend on it.

## THANK YOU!

Thank you to our partners for the attention and dedication you have given to the MRC. We are proud of our early accomplishments and excited to take next steps together to continue realizing our goals. A special thank you to our legislators and elected officials for championing this effort. Your advocacy for the Merrimack River has and continues to bring critical attention and resources to this shared and critical resource.

