



**MASSACHUSETTS
Rivers Alliance**

11 Curtis Avenue, Somerville, MA 02144
617-714-4272 • massriversalliance.org



The Nature Conservancy
Massachusetts



Mystic River
WATERSHED ASSOCIATION



APCC
Association to
Preserve Cape Cod
Preserving the Very Nature of Cape Cod



Charles River
Watershed Association



Wild & Scenic
Taunton River
Stewardship Council



OARS

June 16, 2025

The Honorable Rebecca Rausch, Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Christine Barber, House Chair
Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

submitted by email to JointCommittee.Environment@malegislature.gov

Re: Support for H.1003/S.586 *An Act relative to maintaining adequate water supplies through effective drought management.*

Dear Chair Rausch, Chair Barber, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of H.1003/S.586, *An Act relative to maintaining adequate water supplies through effective drought management*. This letter provides additional detail to the statements given at the Committee's hearing on June 3, 2025.

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is a statewide nonprofit organization with 85 member groups dedicated to protecting and restoring the rivers and streams of the Commonwealth. We and the undersigned organizations share the values of healthy rivers and climate resiliency for the environment, the economy, wildlife, and communities. We thank members of the committee for their work to advance this bill during the 2023-2024 legislative session, and we respectfully urge the committee to report this bill out favorably again this session.

Massachusetts has experienced some level of drought eight times in the last ten years. In the last five years we've seen three significant droughts that each affected every watershed across the

state, including the current drought that began last year. This is the new climate reality that has been expected, and our state's water management laws have not kept up with droughts becoming more frequent and severe.

Modernizing our water conservation measures is a critical part of meeting this new reality. This bill would modernize the Commonwealth's drought management by more effectively and uniformly managing non-essential outdoor water use by region before emergencies arrive.

What follows is an overview of drought impacts, current drought response practices, and the interface of this legislation with updated regulations.

Drought Impacts

Rivers, wildlife, and communities statewide are feeling the impacts of drought. In 2022 and 2016, many rivers and streams hit record low flows, with some totally dry.¹ In 2024 again, about 20% of streams hit record low flows, and many wells reached record low levels.² These prolonged droughts reduce recreation opportunities, imperil drinking water supplies, and decimate aquatic wildlife.

Drought impacts local agriculture. In 2016, Massachusetts farmers suffered \$18 million in revenue loss due to drought related crop loss, including damage to our iconic apple harvest and cranberry bogs.³ Farms were struggling again in 2022 when the United States Department of Agriculture declared nine Massachusetts counties as Natural Disaster Areas due to drought.⁴ For farms without irrigation systems, managers must spend much more on labor costs to make sure their crops stay watered. One farmer in Dracut reported that the additional staff watering time cost him \$50,000 during the summer of 2020.⁵

Wildfires increase with dry conditions. In 2022, there were over 1,200 acres burned from 800 separate wildfire events, including fires in the densely populated communities of Rockport, Saugus, and Gloucester.⁶ In 2024, over 3,654 acres burned in just two months—more than the previous two years combined—challenging firefighters as water supply became limited and wetlands and streams that can provide natural fire barriers were increasingly dry.⁷

Drought poses impacts to our drinking water supplies as well. In 2016, five communities declared water supply emergencies and four out of six drought regions reached groundwater emergencies.⁸ The photo below shows the Hoppin Hill Reservoir in North Attleboro, which provides drinking water to residents of the City of Attleboro. Normally the reservoir's water levels hover around 23 feet deep; in 2022 it was down to three feet. While those on public water supply were subject to a ban on nonessential outdoor watering, those with private wells were not; they could choose to water as much as they like, despite the scarcity.

¹ Massachusetts Drought Management Task Force. [August 23, 2022 Meeting Notes](#). Page 2.

² Massachusetts Drought Management Task Force. [November 6, 2024 Meeting Notes](#). Page 3.

³ Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. [2016 Drought Retrospective](#). Slide 11.

⁴ USDA Farm Service Agency, "[USDA Designates Nine Massachusetts Counties as Primary Natural Disaster Areas](#)."

⁵ Stefan Geller. Lowell Sun. September 26, 2020. "[Drought has mixed effects on farmers across region](#)."

⁶ Colin A. Young. WBUR. August 18, 2022. "[National Guard tapped to wrangle Rockport wildfire](#)."

⁷ Bhaamati Borkhetaria. November 25, 2024. "[Massachusetts burns more acres in 2 months than previous years](#)"

⁸ Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. [2016 Drought Retrospective](#). Slide 7.



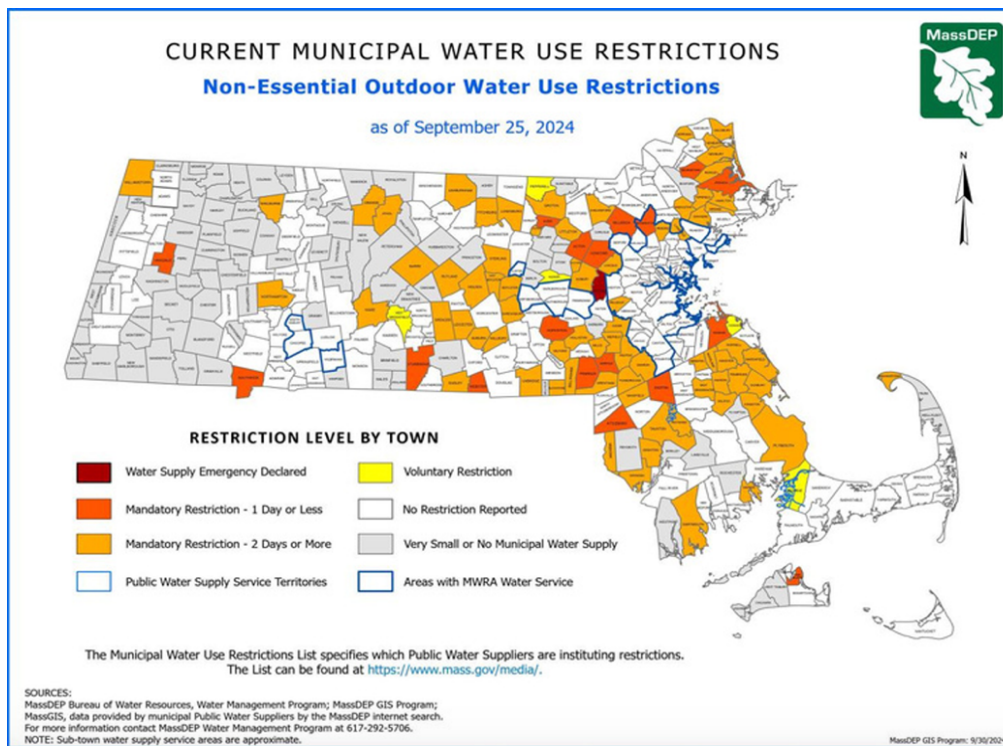
The dry bottom of the Hoppin Hill Reservoir in North Attleboro, which provides drinking water to the City of Attleboro, on August 3, 2022. Charles Krupa / Associated Press.

Drought Response and Progression

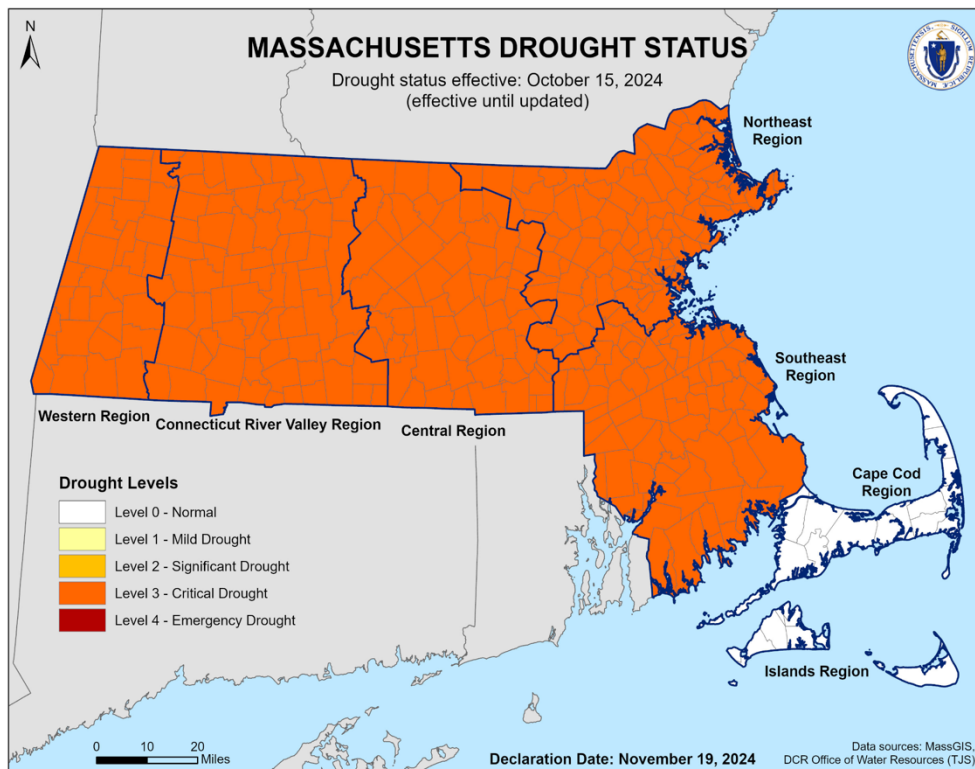
Currently, our response to drought varies from town to town. Each water supplier implements its own water conservation measures based on what's required in their registration or permit, or on a voluntary basis, leading to a patchwork of policies that provides limited relief to our water basins in their time of greatest need. If only some towns in each watershed are conserving water, the overall water savings is minimal. Conflicting rules are also confusing for residents to follow, especially when news about a significant drought is in the mainstream media.

The map on the following page, created by Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, shows each town's water restrictions for September 2024, and how even where there are water supply emergencies, some neighboring municipalities are practicing minimal conservation, if any at all.

This shows water restrictions just before the 2024 drought progressed to more critical levels:



Just a few weeks later, all regions other than the Cape and Islands were in critical drought, as shown on the map below:



This Legislation

This legislation will provide a critical tool to help Massachusetts manage water in our new climate reality of increasingly frequent and severe drought.

To better protect our state, wildlife, and our economy during periods of drought, Massachusetts needs a more uniform, more climate-smart approach.

H.1003/S.586 filed by Representatives Joan Meschino and Dave Rogers, and by Senator Jamie Eldridge:

- gives the Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs the authority to require uniform conservation of non-essential outdoor watering that apply to all water users in a drought region;
- codifies the existing Drought Management Task Force in statute.

The conservation measures that would be applied under this bill come from the state's 2019 Drought Management Plan, created by the Executive Office and Energy Affairs and the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency after the dramatic losses of the 2016-2017 drought. Unfortunately, the plan's comprehensive drought response is only a recommendation; the state still lacks the authority to require conservation of non-essential outdoor water use in a drought unless there is a declared emergency. Passing H.1003/S.586 would put the Drought Management Plan into action, and allow the state to require a gradual escalation of uniform outdoor watering restrictions during drought.

Reducing nonessential outdoor watering is a cost-effective first line of defense against drought, since outdoor watering in the summer can increase total water use by 60%.⁹ Essential water uses, including agriculture, other business use, and indoor domestic use would not be impeded.

This legislation is essential to ensure that Massachusetts handles drought more responsibly. The Governor lacks the authority to require water conservation measures until a full-blown emergency arrives, at which point our state would be experiencing crop failures, increased fire danger, loss of aquatic life, and threats to water supply. It is far more prudent to conserve water in the early stages of drought in order to prevent such emergencies.

Conclusion

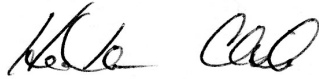
Many of our current water management policies were created decades ago, and did not anticipate climate change. Scientists predict that droughts will increase in frequency and severity in Massachusetts. We are experiencing this already. This bill gives us a key tool to manage our water more sustainably as our climate changes.

Massachusetts has been a nationwide leader on climate mitigation and resilience. This legislation provides an opportunity to continue that leadership by increasing our climate readiness and modernizing our drought response and water conservation efforts for public health, our economy, and the environment.

⁹ Town of Needham. [Water Conservation Program](#).

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact Heather Clish at 617-750-2982 or heatherclish@massriversalliance.org with any questions or if there is any additional information we can provide.

Sincerely,



Heather Clish
Policy Director
Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

Don Keeran
Assistant Director
Association to Preserve Cape Cod

Laura Jasinski
Executive Director
Charles River Conservancy

Cabell Eames
Advocacy Director
Charles River Watershed Association

Christopher Bathurst
Board President
Deerfield River Watershed Association

David Melly
Legislative Director
Environmental League of Massachusetts

Sam Anderson
Director of Legislative and Government
Affairs
Mass Audubon

Nasser Brahim
Director of Climate Resilience
Mystic River Watershed Association

Dorothy McGlincy
Executive Director
Massachusetts Association of Conservation
Commissions

Zachary Sheldon
Policy Manager
The Nature Conservancy

Samantha Woods
Executive Director
North South River Watershed Association

Matt Brown
Executive Director
OARS

Joseph Callahan
Board President
Taunton River Watershed Alliance

Gloria Bancroft
Coordinator
Taunton River Stewardship Council