

*“We were sent here to serve our citizens, not our ambitions.”*

*— President Barack Obama,*

*State of the Union Address, January 2011*

**Debra Shore, Commissioner  
Metropolitan Water Reclamation District**



**2010 ANNUAL REPORT**

**When I became a Commissioner, I started to feel differently about rain. I still regard it as a gift from the heavens, the only natural resource delivered free of charge to our doorsteps, but now I worry about flooding, basement backups, and contaminated runoff. And 2010 gave me plenty of reason to worry. The historic storms of late July dumped up to seven inches of rain on Cook County—more than 115 billion gallons—affecting hundreds of thousands of residents and causing more than \$310 million in damages. That was the second such massive storm in as many years. As our climate continues to change, we can expect more intense rain storms. We must do a better job of peeling back some of the impervious surface we’ve laid over our landscape (accounting for approximately 42 percent of our 946 square miles), and finding ways to treat rain as an asset, not as a liability.**

# It's Your Money

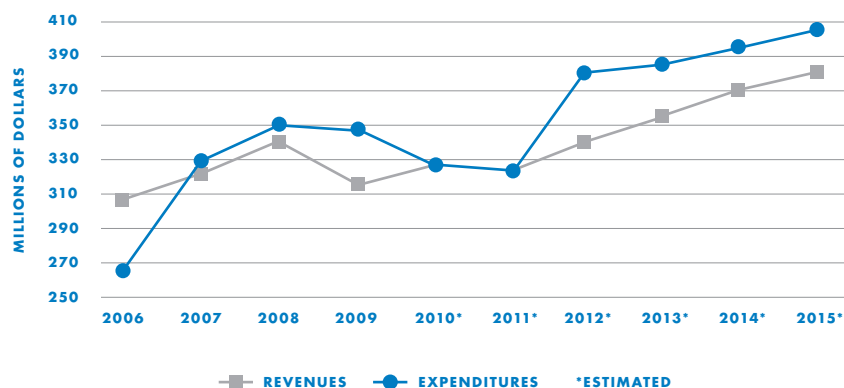
When I was growing up, my Dad would put cash from his paycheck into a series of envelopes in his desk drawer labeled "Grocery," "Gas & Auto," "Clothing," and "Misc." for my mother to use. I suppose they would haggle things out if there weren't enough cash in the envelopes.

The three biggest envelopes in the MWRD budget are labeled Salaries, Health Care, and Energy (Gas & Electric). Unfortunately, as we learned in mid-2010, the amount of cash available for those envelopes was insufficient to meet the rising cost of these obligations.

In many respects, the MWRD is among the best-managed and most financially healthy government agencies in Illinois. The District retains three AAA bond ratings. It established a trust for Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB) and has funded it with \$50 million as of January 2011. No District employees have been let go for budgetary reasons; nor have any been compelled to take furlough days. The Civic Federation routinely gives the MWRD high marks on the transparency of its budget, and its unfunded pension obligation is far better than most other government bodies.

Still, as District staff began developing the 2011 budget in mid-2010, we were looking at a revenue shortfall of approximately \$26 to \$37 million, a substantial bite in an operating budget of \$341.1 million. Clearly we would have to make hard choices, such as deferring maintenance, raising employees' health insurance deductible, forgoing planned payments to the OPEB trust, or denying cost-of-living adjustments to non-represented employees. (Of the District's 2,071 employees, approximately 850 are represented by unions and thus have salaries and benefits locked into a three-year contract.)

## OPERATING REVENUES AND EXPENDITURES



Rather than lay off employees, the District has reduced its staff through attrition (identifying positions that would not be filled when an employee leaves). As a result, the District has 45 fewer employees than last year.

District staff presented a range of options to the Board of Commissioners to address the anticipated revenue shortfall. Some items were modest but important, other options generated greater savings, but also placed a greater burden on employees.

ITEM	CHANGE	APPROX. SAVINGS
Pay Statements	Eliminating the mailing of paper pay statements to non-represented employees	\$64,000/yr
Parade Float	Cancel District's participation in parades for the next year	\$25,000/yr for each year the float is not in use
Non-Represented Employee Tuition Benefits	Reduced value of benefit	\$110,000/yr
Vehicle Fleet	Reduced number of vehicles	\$667,000/yr
Non-Represented Employee Health Insurance	Raised deductible and contribution	\$334,000/yr
Non-Represented Termination Pay*	Eliminated retroactively and proactively	\$500,000/yr

By early December we had balanced our budget, but not without significant disruptions to staff and morale. Our decision to eliminate or reduce several employee benefits prompted more than 75 employees to retire between November 15 and December 31, including our Executive Director, General Counsel, Treasurer, Acting General Counsel, and Director of Monitoring & Research. In addition, a number of employees sued the District maintaining that they were entitled to some of these benefits as a form of deferred compensation.

Unfortunately, the forecast for 2012 includes additional revenue shortfalls, and we've already harvested most of the low-hanging fruit!

▶ For more information about the MWRD sources of support, visit [debrashore.org/Budget](http://debrashore.org/Budget)

\* Termination pay was a benefit entitling MWRD employees to five days' pay if they left after five or more years of service, with a maximum of 30 days' pay after 20 years of service. It had been part of the benefits package for more than 40 years; we eliminated it as of December 31, 2010.

## To Serve and Protect

There's no question that Chicago Police officers need annual firearms practice at an outdoor range to train in the wide variety of conditions in which they must work. In order to provide their officers with such a space, the Police Department picked an isolated 33-acre parcel of MWRD land at 134th St. and Torrence Ave. on Chicago's far south side as the site to build a new state-of-the-art outdoor range.

In some respects, the MWRD site is an ideal location—bordered on two sides by towering landfill and more than a mile from the nearest residential development. But it also happens to be next to Whitford Pond, where great blue herons and other marshland birds may nest, including the Yellow-Headed Blackbird and the Black-Crowned Night-Heron (shown right). This site is also immediately across the Calumet River from Hegewisch Marsh, where the City of Chicago plans to build the Ford Calumet Environmental Center, with numerous trails to guide thousands of schoolchildren and families for a rare experience of nature in an urban setting.

### Sounds of the Shooting Range

The Police Department sought a 39-year lease of the parcel from the MWRD for \$10 a year (plus free training for MWRD police officers at the range and at the police academy). My colleagues and I insisted that the Police Dept. hold a public meeting to inform neighboring communities about their plans and pressed for noise studies assessing the effect of the firing range not only on the closest residential communities, but also on the nearby natural areas. These noise studies showed that people using the trails in Hegewisch Marsh—and wildlife that make these places home—would likely hear a perceptible level of noise from the shooting range across the river. From 8 a.m. until 8 p.m.

### Wildlife Survey Needed

I voted against the request because I felt the site selection process was flawed. Moreover, I agreed with Commissioner Frank Avila, who also opposed the lease, that a wildlife survey should have been conducted. The MWRD Board of Commissioners supported proceeding with the lease, but we learned in March that the Police Department may be re-evaluating the proposal.

▶ For more information on this issue, visit [debrashore.org/OutdoorRange](http://debrashore.org/OutdoorRange)





## It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time

### How Asian Carp Became the Latest Menace Threatening the Health of the Great Lakes

I first learned about invasive species roughly 20 years ago when I began volunteering to restore oak woods and prairies in the Cook County Forest Preserves. The principal activity of ecological restoration, it turns out, is removing shrubs and plants that have invaded our ecosystems and are crowding out the native plants (and, thus, many of the animals and insects that depend on those plants). Common buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), for instance, was brought to North America from Europe in the 1800s as an ornamental shrub for use in hedgerows. It's superb for hedges—producing leaves earlier in the spring and holding onto them later in the fall than most other plants. Birds eat the berries, which act as a potent laxative (hence the Latin name *cathartica*), and disperse the seeds widely. In the absence of fires, which used to sweep across our landscape, these buckthorn shrubs have invaded our woods, eroding the soil, shading out spring flowers, and inhibiting reproduction of oaks and other sun-loving trees. Buckthorns have become a major threat to the health of our woods.



Similarly, bighead and silver carp—collectively referred to as Asian carp—were originally imported to the southern United States from China in the early 1970s for evaluation as plankton control organisms in aquaculture ponds and wastewater treatment lagoons. Due in part to flooding and in part to a lack of concern and lax controls, they escaped shortly thereafter into the lower Mississippi River system. Over the last four decades, they have spread across most of the Mississippi Basin.



Along the way, Asian carp have significantly altered their new ecosystems: voracious filter-feeders and fecund breeders, these species have thrived in the United States, frequently at the expense of native species with which they compete for food. The August 2009 discovery of Asian carp DNA (traces of DNA detected in water samples are called environmental DNA, or eDNA) in the Lower Des Plaines River—approximately 1,460 miles from the Gulf of Mexico—ignited fears that these invasive fishes will migrate through the Chicago Area Waterway System into the Great Lakes, where they could devastate already impaired ecosystems and economically valuable fisheries.

Fierce debate has surrounded the question of how best to respond to this threat, with conservationists and several Great Lakes states calling on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and the MWRD to take drastic measures. Representatives of the barge and tour boat industries, however, have argued against any steps that might impede their operations. The following pages summarize the major scientific and political developments of the last 19 months. Let us hope—no, let us pray—that these will prove to have been 19 productive months, rather than the prelude to an ecological catastrophe.

# The Dilemma of Disinfection

When the Chicago River was treated like an open sewer by the stockyards, heavy industry, and the residents of Chicago, a canoeist on the river would certainly have elicited a double-take. Today, few think twice about seeing a kayaker, rowing team, or angler on the river—a remarkable turnaround in the river's fortunes and aspect, in large part due to the efforts of the MWRD. But is the river clean enough? That is the question the Illinois Pollution Control Board (IPCB) is attempting to answer.

The IPCB, the state agency charged with issuing pollution regulations, began conducting hearings in 2007 to decide whether to require the MWRD to disinfect its wastewater effluent at its three largest wastewater treatment plants—Stickney, Calumet, and North Side—and whether to adopt other proposed standards that would improve water quality. I've been following this issue closely because of its implications for the environment, the District's budget, and the region's image.

In early August 2010, the IPCB issued rules designating different reaches of the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS) for different types of recreation. According to this ruling, water quality in most of the CAWS must be suitable for incidental contact recreation. That is, the Chicago River and its branches, the Calumet, Grand Calumet, and Little Calumet Rivers, the Cal-Sag Channel, and parts of the upper Sanitary and Ship Canal and Lower Des Plaines River should be kept safe for kayakers, canoeists, rowers, fishers, and motor-boaters.

Only a small, heavily industrialized stretch of the Sanitary and Ship Canal and Lower Des Plaines River was ruled to be unsafe for recreation.

The IPCB's next decision will be whether disinfection of MWRD effluent is necessary to protect recreators on the CAWS. In August, researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago released their final report on the Chicago Health and Environmental Exposure Research Study (CHEERS). This study, sponsored by the MWRD at a cost of more than \$8 million, sought first to measure the risk of illness faced by kayakers, canoeists, fishers, and other recreators on the CAWS. It then compared this risk to the risk faced by recreators on general use waters (such as Lake Michigan, the Skokie Lagoons, and the Fox River) and by non-water recreators.



The CHEERS final report concluded that recreating on the region's waterways carries a risk of acute gastrointestinal illness not faced by non-water recreators like joggers and bikers. For every 1,000 recreators, approximately 12 or 13 cases of acute gastrointestinal illness could be attributed to recreating on the water.

But the study also found that it doesn't seem to matter whether you recreate on the CAWS or elsewhere in the region: recreators on the CAWS and on general use waters were equally likely to become sick to their stomachs. However, CAWS recreators were more likely than those recreating on general use waters and non-water recreators to develop eye symptoms—nearly 16 more cases per 1,000 recreators as compared to non-water recreators, and 11 additional cases as compared to general use water recreators.



In hearings on the study, District representatives emphasized that recreators on general use waters, which do not receive undisinfected wastewater effluent, were just as likely to develop acute gastrointestinal illness as were recreators on the CAWS, where undisinfected effluent typically constitutes more than 70 percent of the total flow. This similarity,



PHOTO: TOM GILL

they argued, suggests that disinfection would provide little or no public health benefit. The MWRD also pointed out that the majority of reported gastrointestinal and eye symptoms were mild, rarely requiring more serious treatment than over-the-counter medicines. According to the District, these findings suggest that the financial and environmental costs of disinfection outweigh its public health benefits.

IEPA and several environmental groups disputed the District's claims. They argued first that CHEERS was an imperfect study and that, by itself, it doesn't prove that the current health risks of water recreation won't be reduced by disinfection. Given the well-established connection between the microbes present in undisinfected effluent and human illness, they claimed, the CHEERS findings are not sufficient reason to postpone new public health measures. Proponents of disinfection also argued that 12 cases of acute gastrointestinal illness and 16 cases of eye symptoms per 1,000 recreators represent an unacceptable level of risk that warrants substantial efforts to improve water quality on the CAWS.

And so the debate continues. The rulemaking hearings have become the longest in IPCB history. All the testimony and public comments are available on the IPCB website. (Scroll down to the bottom of the page and look for Rulemaking 2008-09.) The IPCB's ruling on disinfection should come sometime in 2011. I am anxiously awaiting their decision.

▶ All related testimony and public comments are available at [debrashore.org/IPCBpollution](http://debrashore.org/IPCBpollution)

▶ For additional information and updates on this issue, please visit us at [debrashore.org/Disinfection2010](http://debrashore.org/Disinfection2010)

# 34 OUT OF 35

BOARD MEETINGS, STUDY SESSIONS,  
AND PUBLIC HEARINGS ATTENDED



PHOTO: KATE REID

# 54

MILES HIKED  
IN THE SIERRA  
NEVADA

# 2

1 AWARD RECEIVED (TREE OF LIFE,  
FROM THE JEWISH NATIONAL FUND)

BOARDS ON WHICH I SERVED AS AN OFFICER  
(THE GREAT LAKES PROTECTION FUND AND  
THE GAY & LESBIAN LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE)

# 6.534 billion

GALLONS OF STORMWATER OVERFLOW RELEASED  
INTO LAKE MICHIGAN DURING JULY 24 STORM



# 3

LARGE BOXES FILLED  
WITH UNUSED AND EXPIRED  
PHARMACEUTICALS AND  
DROPPED OFF AT THE STICKNEY  
WASTEWATER TREATMENT  
PLANT ON DRUG TAKE-BACK  
DAY IN SEPTEMBER

## *Tinkers* by Paul Harding

BEST BOOK READ THIS YEAR

## *At Home* by Bill Bryson

BEST AUDIOBOOK HEARD THIS YEAR

# 33

SPEAKING  
ENGAGEMENTS  
IN COOK COUNTY

Friends of Debra Shore  
P. O. Box 4674  
Skokie, IL 60077

Presorted Standard  
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## 2010 Annual Report

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