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Ipswich River

THREAT: Excessive water withdrawals

STATE:

Massachusetts

AT RISK:

Community resiliency, drinking water, wildlife habitat, recreation

SUMMARY

The Ipswich River is the main drinking water source for Northeastern Massachusetts, but excessive water withdrawals made worse by climate change are putting both the ecosystem and the region's water security at risk. Two severe droughts in the last five years and a global climate crisis have increased the urgency to drastically improve river management. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection must fix how it implements existing laws and improve its regulations to support the river's health, regional water security and the many communities, businesses and residents who depend on the Ipswich River.



PHOTO: DEAN BAUMEISTER

THE RIVER

Winding 45 miles from Burlington, Massachusetts, to Plum Island Sound, the Ipswich River is the main source of drinking water for 350,000 people and businesses in 14 communities. Located just north of Boston, the basin supports a multi-million-dollar shellfish industry and habitat for several rare and threatened species. Aside from providing clean water and healthy habitat, the Ipswich River offers free, undisturbed nature and recreation for residents of Essex County, the third-most diverse county in Massachusetts.

The Ipswich River feeds into the Great Marsh Area of Critical Environmental Concern, New England's largest salt marsh. The marsh includes a National Wildlife Refuge and is an internationally recognized Important Bird Area. Nearly half the basin is protected by state parks, Mass Audubon's Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary, and private and town-owned conservation lands. The Ipswich offers hundreds of miles of trails and other chances to explore nature for five million people within an hour's drive.

The Ipswich River (called Agawam in the Algonquian language, meaning 'beyond the marsh') flows through ancestral lands of the Pawtucket Tribe, as well as the Massachusetts, Penacook, Pentucket, Abenaki and Wabanaki Confederacy.

THE THREAT

The greatest threat to the Ipswich River is excessive water withdrawals. The 1986 Massachusetts Water Management Act (WMA) authorizes the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to set water withdrawal limits that factor in environmental impacts. However, DEP's implementation of this law follows a confusing system that exempts more users than it regulates. DEP classifies three categories of users. The first class, which includes several large water suppliers, were granted automatic water registrations and are exempt from conservation rules. The second class, any water users withdrawing less than 100,000 gallons per day averaged over the entire year, are also exempt. Since lawn watering and other outdoor nonessential uses peak when stream flows are lowest in the summer and early fall, annual averages do not address actual impacts. As droughts are increasing with

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Continued



PHOTO: IPSWICH RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

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TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/
IpswichRiver2021](https://AmericanRivers.org/IpswichRiver2021)

climate change, basing regulation on annual averages is ill-advised. In the summer, 15 million gallons per day are wasted in the Ipswich due to outdoor watering, even during drought. Only a third class of users, those above-threshold users without registrations, must obtain permits and comply with water use and conservation regulations. Communities in this third class grapple with an unfair system, creating conflict among residents subject to different rules while impacting the same river.

The Ipswich River is the poster child for the state's outdated water system. An astounding 80 percent of Ipswich water is exported out of the watershed. Worse, more than 90 percent of withdrawals are exempt from any water use conditions like conservation measures. Even in non-drought years, stretches of river run dry. Dry riverbeds result in fish kills, ecological damage, loss of recreation and threats to the quality and security of the water supply. The climate crisis has made things worse. Municipalities and residents are increasingly worried about running out of water. While behavior and land use changes can lower some water use, we cannot solve this problem without a more balanced regulatory framework. This is a critical moment for state officials, water suppliers, communities and residents to work together to make Massachusetts a leader for smart water use in an era of climate change.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

2021 is a pivotal year for improving water security in Massachusetts. Both registrations and permits are up for renewal for the first time in two decades. Two severe droughts in the last five years have spurred leaders into action. A new Drought Bill was introduced in the state legislature to regulate all water use during drought. Massachusetts recently adopted a new Drought Plan and is now creating several new climate policies. An Ipswich River Task Force was also formed by local legislators to help facilitate improvements. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get better rules on the books. New rules will reduce conflict and spur collaboration between towns. The battle lines are already being drawn — pitting concerned communities, businesses and residents against a faction of water users who benefit from the status quo. State legislators and agency officials need to hear from the public that they support effective and balanced water management that ensures enough clean water for communities and the river.

Specifically, DEP must overhaul how they regulate water withdrawals to protect rivers and account for climate change. After several decades of inaction, DEP has announced new regulations it will attempt to pass this year before renewing water registrations. Without significant stakeholder involvement and public input, there is considerable risk these desperately needed changes will not happen.

Limited water supplies, coupled with longer and more severe droughts across the country, have brought us to a key moment for reimagining water policy and improving the health of our communities. What we do for the Ipswich River over the coming years could serve as a litmus test for improving climate and river policy throughout the country.