



# Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

RECOVERING RESOURCES, TRANSFORMING WATER

2025

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ENGAGEMENT. COLLABORATION. INNOVATION. EQUITY. RESILIENCE.

## THE METROPOLITAN WATER RECLAMATION DISTRICT OF GREATER CHICAGO

# An illustrious record of reliability and ingenuity

Since 1889, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) has been protecting public health, area waterways and the planet.

Throughout its history, the MWRD has made an indelible imprint on the Chicago area and the quality of life for all our residents. The MWRD established this reputation for unfaltering dependability and innovative leadership treating the region's wastewater, managing stormwater and protecting our water resources. While our generations of service are historically significant, there are many more exciting chapters on the horizon.

Since undertaking the extraordinary task of reversing the flow of the Chicago River to protect Lake Michigan, the MWRD engaged in more than a century of progress and continuous innovation to care for our water environment. Those early commitments were aimed at protecting the public's health and water resources, and while the MWRD maintains that same level of excellence at an exceptional

value to taxpayers, we also pride ourselves in cleaning water in the face of an evolving system of water treatment. Today, we are met with a changing climate, record rain events and an increased use of impervious pavement across our flat terrain. As a result, we are continuously challenged to find comprehensive solutions to manage stormwater and prevent flooding, all while grasping emerging technologies to improve water quality and protect the Chicago River that is now soaring in popularity. To meet this demand, we are developing new systems to reduce nutrients in our water, decreasing greenhouse gas emissions, conserving and reusing water, recovering renewable resources, and maintaining a tradition of reliability and resourcefulness that has become a hallmark for our agency across the region.

As a utility of the future, we are also educating the communities we serve and connecting with new partners to create awareness for our water environment. By actively forming new partnerships, engaging the public and urging our communities to consider the countless ways we can all contribute to improving our water environment, we are taking a role of leadership, fostering collaboration, broadening our reach and magnifying our impact.

The perseverance of the MWRD is shown in the resiliency of Cook County. The MWRD continues to rise to the challenge to effectively manage stormwater and mitigate flooding, and that commitment is expected to continue for generations to come. This publication will highlight the many ways the MWRD is leading as an essential and innovative champion of our environment. ★



*In its daily role of recovering resources and transforming water, the MWRD is protecting the regional water environment and mitigating flooding through its 110 miles of tunnels serving the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (above), recovering nutrients from water to be reused as fertilizer (above right) and processing biosolids to be reused as a soil amendment to help grow plant life (bottom right).*



*The MWRD not only transforms the region's wastewater into clean water, but it also protects the surface of the water from pollution.*

# Financial summary

The MWRD maintains a strong financial position with a AAA bond rating from Fitch Ratings, a AA+ bond rating from Standard & Poor's Global Ratings and a Aa1 rating from Moody's Investor Services.

The MWRD delivers essential services to the public and continues to innovate in a fiscally responsible manner. Every year, the MWRD creates and shares a full financial plan for the budget year which starts on Jan. 1 and ends on Dec. 31. The MWRD maintains a balanced budget and has a long history of responsible financial management.

The MWRD Board of Commissioners approved a \$1.7-billion budget for 2025 with a total property tax levy of \$709.7 million. The 2025 budget is a fiscally responsible spending plan that invests in public infrastructure and considers the long-term environmental and financial implications of permit compliance. Despite persistent inflationary pressures, the MWRD maintains a stable financial outlook and is committed to providing taxpayer value to the residents of Cook County.

The \$1.7 billion budget appropriation is allocated to seven separate funds, created to account for the different types of activities that the MWRD fulfills, while ensuring public money is spent appropriately. These include the Corporate Fund, Capital Improvements Bond Fund, Construction Fund, Stormwater Management Fund, Retirement Fund, Bond Redemption & Interest Fund, and Reserve Claim Fund.

The Corporate Fund is the general fund of the MWRD and is used to account for the operations and payments of general expenditures. The 2025 operating budget reflects current economic conditions and inflationary cost increases related to chemicals, commodities, personnel, and a one-time Tunnel and Reservoir Plan maintenance cost.

The Capital Improvement Program of the MWRD includes appropriations from the Capital Improvements Bond Fund, Construction Fund, and the capital projects funded through the Stormwater Management Fund. The MWRD's major functions of sewage collection and treatment, solids processing, solids utilization, flood control, and stormwater management are capital intensive, requiring significant investments in infrastructure.

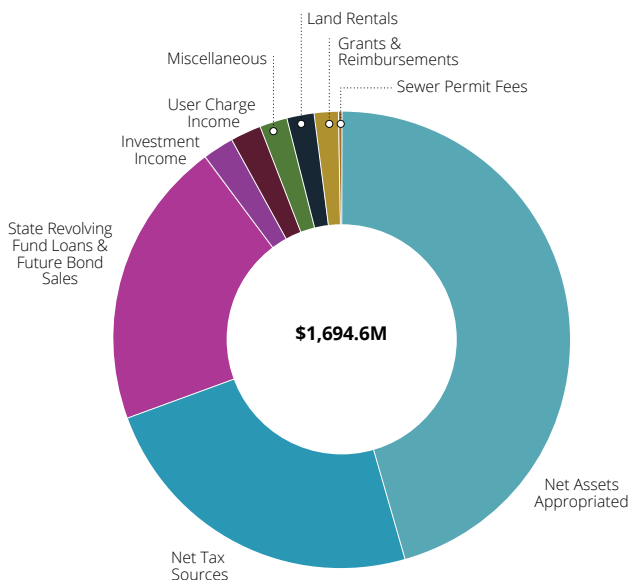
The 2025 budget was prepared within the framework of the MWRD's 2021-2025 Strategic Plan and includes \$16.9 million of new initiative funding to support the plan's implementation. The five Strategic Goals of resource management, stormwater management, workforce excellence, community engagement, and enterprise resilience are based on our mission, vision, and values of excellence, respect, innovation, safety, equity and diversity, and accountability.

Using the Strategic Plan as a guideline to establish priorities, the operation, maintenance, and investment in the MWRD's infrastructure, flood control projects, and other essential services will continue to receive primary focus. The 2025 Budget continues our conservative fiscal management and includes the policies, objectives and resources to allow the MWRD to remain true to our mission of protecting the region's water environment and the health of the residents of Cook County.

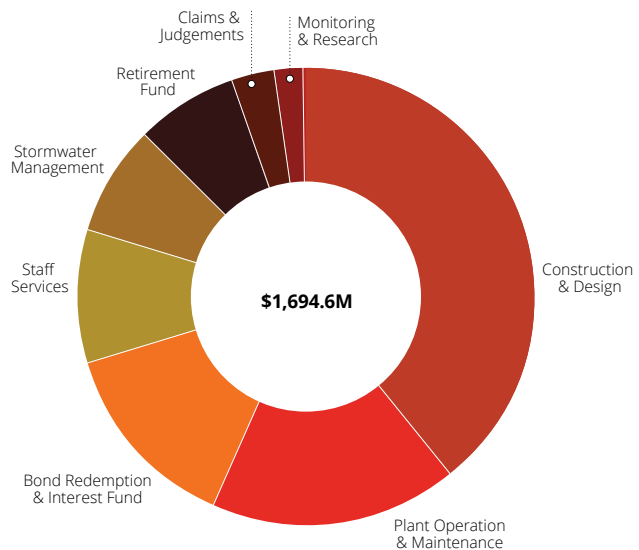
For the complete budget document, please visit [mwrld.org/budget](http://mwrld.org/budget).

To review the progress on the 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, go to [mwrld.org/strategic-plan](http://mwrld.org/strategic-plan) to find the link to the Strategic Plan Dashboard.

## WHERE MWRD MONEY COMES FROM



## WHERE MWRD MONEY GOES



## IN 2024, THE MWRD . . .

**Captured more than 20 billion gallons** of combined sewage and stormwater in our Tunnel and Reservoir Plan that formerly would have polluted our waterways.

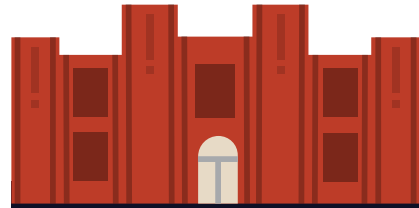
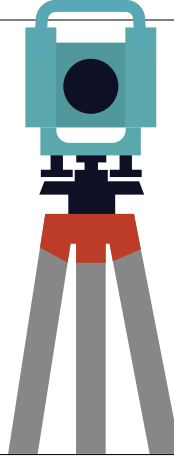
**Served 5.19 million** people within our **882.1 square mile** service area.

**Averaged about 1.21 billion gallons** per day (BGD) in treatment volume at our water reclamation plants.

**Conducted 27** fish surveys across area waterways from June to October 2024, collecting, identifying, weighing, and measuring **5,981** fish, nearly all of which were released back into their habitats.



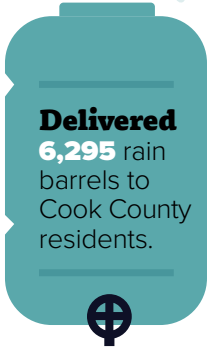
**Worked on more than 30** new stormwater management projects designed to protect nearly 2,000 structures.



**Engaged with over 303,000** people at tours of our water reclamation plants (WRPs), at community events and presentations throughout Cook County.



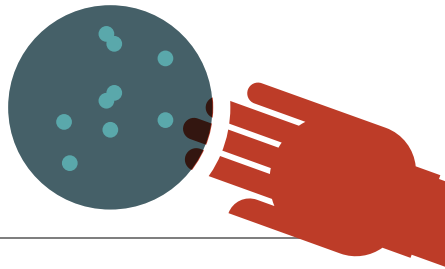
**Delivered 6,295** rain barrels to Cook County residents.



**Collected more than 442 pounds** of medications through our medication disposal program and community outreach.



**Performed an estimated 483,560** lab tests at our **7** water reclamation plants to ensure the quality of local waterways and the biosolids we produce.



**Provided 10,500** free native tree saplings through our “Restore the Canopy, Plant a Tree” program.

**Removed an estimated 11,900 cubic yards** of debris from small streams and 2,050 cubic yards from rivers in 2024.



**Distributed over 14,700** free milkweed and other native wildflower seed packets to capture more stormwater and support monarch butterflies and other pollinators.

**Carried out 702,700** hourly measurements at **20** different locations in the area waterways to monitor dissolved oxygen levels, which are essential for aquatic life and continued steady improvement in water quality.



## OUR HISTORY

# Reversing the Chicago River, revitalizing a region

Although the MWRD's name has changed a few times and the scope of our work has expanded, the quality of service remains the same. Today's projects are as ambitious as they were more than 100 years ago, making profound impacts both locally and across the entire region.

Managing today's water invokes an incredible need for the expertise of the MWRD, but it was the dire conditions of the local water environment in the 19th century that first demanded our services.

As a response to a public health crisis coupled with the city's exponential growth, the MWRD was originally organized as the Sanitary District of Chicago in 1889 under an act of the Illinois General Assembly. The enabling act was in direct response to contamination of the Lake Michigan water supply and nuisance conditions of the rivers. During that time, a polluted river flowed directly into the lake and caused waterborne illnesses. The Sanitary District's first priority became reversing the flow of the Chicago and Calumet River Systems to prevent the discharge of sewage into Lake Michigan. The water instead discharged into the Des Plaines River, where it could dilute as it flowed into the Illinois River and eventually the Mississippi River. To make this happen, the Sanitary District's dedicated staff constructed a 61.3-mile-system of canals and waterway improvements. The canals cut through the sub-continental dividing ridge, allowing the river to flow by gravity away from the lake and down a steeper slope. Workers blasted, dug and hauled heavy rock and deepened, straightened and widened waterways to convey sewage and stormwater to improve the quality of area waters.

The agency's first projects, reversal of the Chicago and then the Calumet River, were engineering mar-

vels that not only improved environmental conditions but also helped to distinguish the agency around the world. The monumental achievements set a tone of impressive environmental engineering accomplishments and scientific breakthroughs. From there, the Sanitary District built intercepting sewers, pumping stations and water reclamation plants to clean water. The agency's mission grew from protecting the lake to creating a new flourishing waterway system. These early advancements were followed by a century of innovation in water treatment technology. The engineers surveying the property and construction activities also photographed their work, leaving behind an archive of 14,000 images.

From 1955 through 1988, the District was called the Metropolitan Sanitary District of Greater Chicago. In order to provide a more accurate perception of functions and responsibilities, the name was changed again in 1989 to the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. Over that time, we went on to construct tunnels and reservoirs, aeration stations, nutrient recovery facilities and green infrastructure projects. We now operate the world's largest water reclamation facility, the world's largest nutrient recovery facility, the world's largest wastewater treatment ultra-violet (UV) installation, and the world's largest combined sewer reservoir.

Today, the MWRD serves 5.19 million residents living in Chicago and 128 suburban communities in an 882-square-mile service area across Cook County. ★



### The MWRD's Egan Water Reclamation Plant in Schaumburg turns 50 in 2025.

The plant serves close to 200,000 residents in a 44-square-mile area and treats about 30 million gallons of wastewater per day. Seven years after it came into service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency selected the Egan WRP as the "best operated and maintained" large plant in Region 5. Today it stands as a leader in piloting emerging technologies and process initiatives that reduce carbon emissions, while promoting renewable energy resources.



*Workers load rock for removal during excavation of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal in September 1894. At the time, there were more than 5,000 workers assigned to the project that would lead to reversal of the flow of the Chicago River. The MWRD recognizes the 125th anniversary of the completion of this critical project in 2025.*

## ESSENTIAL SERVICES

# Treating wastewater and protecting public health

The MWRD treats about 1.2 billion gallons of water per day, or more than 400 billion gallons per year, after it flows down drains, leaves households and industrial and commercial facilities, and runs off streets and sidewalks.

With a daily total treatment capacity of more than 2 billion gallons, the MWRD collects, cleans and returns that water to the environment in a matter of hours. The efficient manner in which the MWRD works is a crowning achievement in a rich history that strives to protect public health and the environment. Annually the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) honors MWRD water reclamation plants for meeting decades of compliance in National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit requirements and federal Clean Water Act standards.

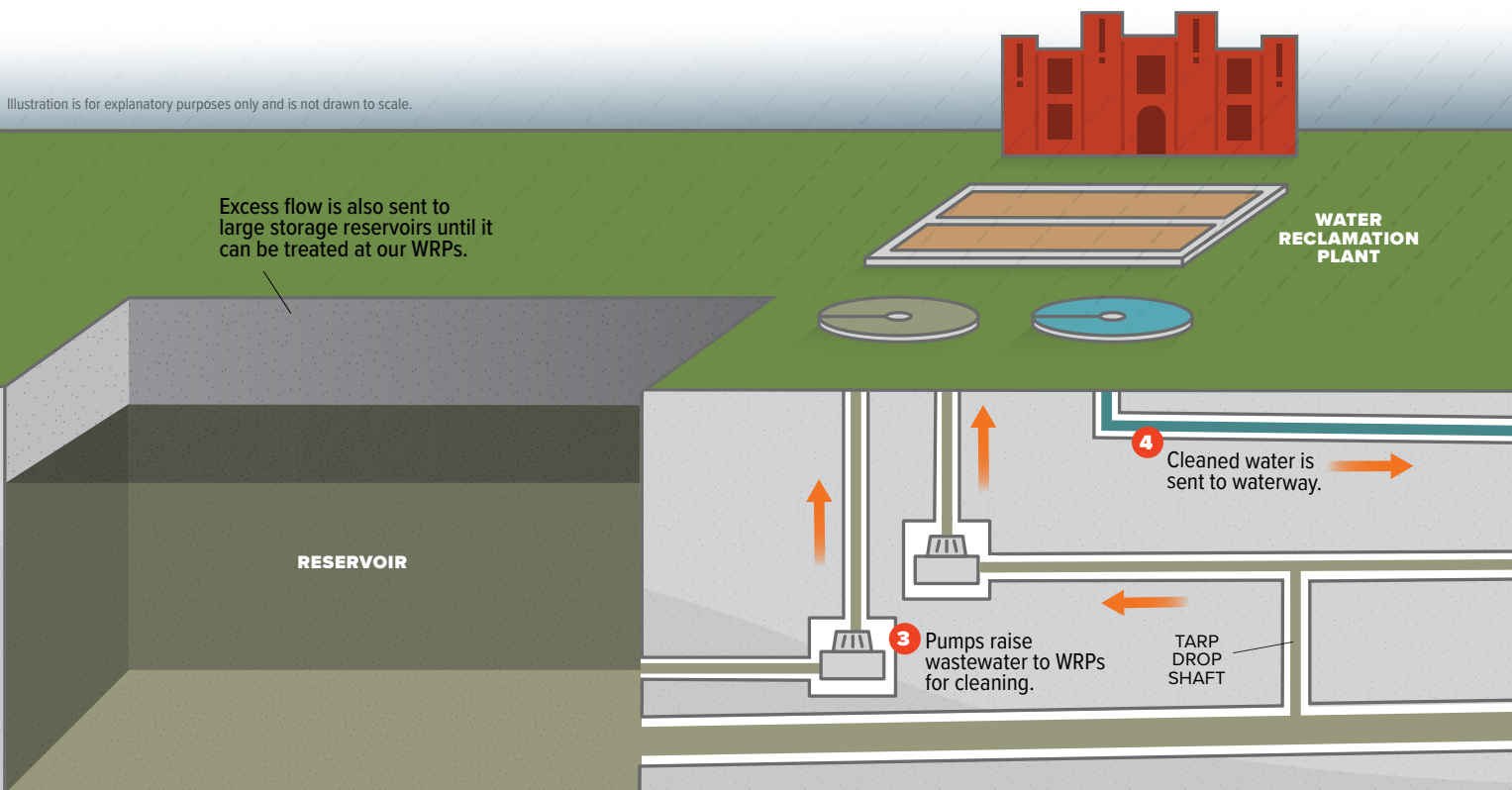
The MWRD owns and operates seven WRPs. Our Stickney WRP is considered one of the largest for full secondary treatment by volume. The MWRD also owns and operates 560 miles of intercepting sewers, which are larger sewers that receive flow from approximately 10,000 local sewer system

connections, and force mains, which are pipes that move water under pressure by using pumps or compressors. The WRPs mimic the purification process that occurs naturally in rivers, condensing what would take one or two weeks to less than 12 hours. Once considered waste, the discarded water that flows to our plants for treatment is now considered a collection of resources to be recovered and reused beneficially. In addition to cleaning water for reuse and discharge into our waterways, the process works to recover solids and nutrients that are beneficially returned to the environment. The process also strives for energy efficiency, energy generation and recovery to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Through these efforts, we are promoting a more sustainable society, generating savings for taxpayers and enhancing our wastewater treatment operation. ★

## How Sewers Work

Local municipal sewers carry wastewater to MWRD's larger intercepting sewers, which flows into one of seven WRPs across Cook County. If the intercepting sewers, water reclamation plants and reservoirs reach capacity during heavy rain, the local sewer continues to drain, or "overflow," to a waterway. This is known as combined sewer overflow, which is happening less thanks to TARP expansion.

Illustration is for explanatory purposes only and is not drawn to scale.





**CURRENT MAX FLOW TO WATER RECLAMATION PLANTS**

**Stickney**  
Cicero  
1,440 MGD

**O'Brien**  
Skokie  
450 MGD

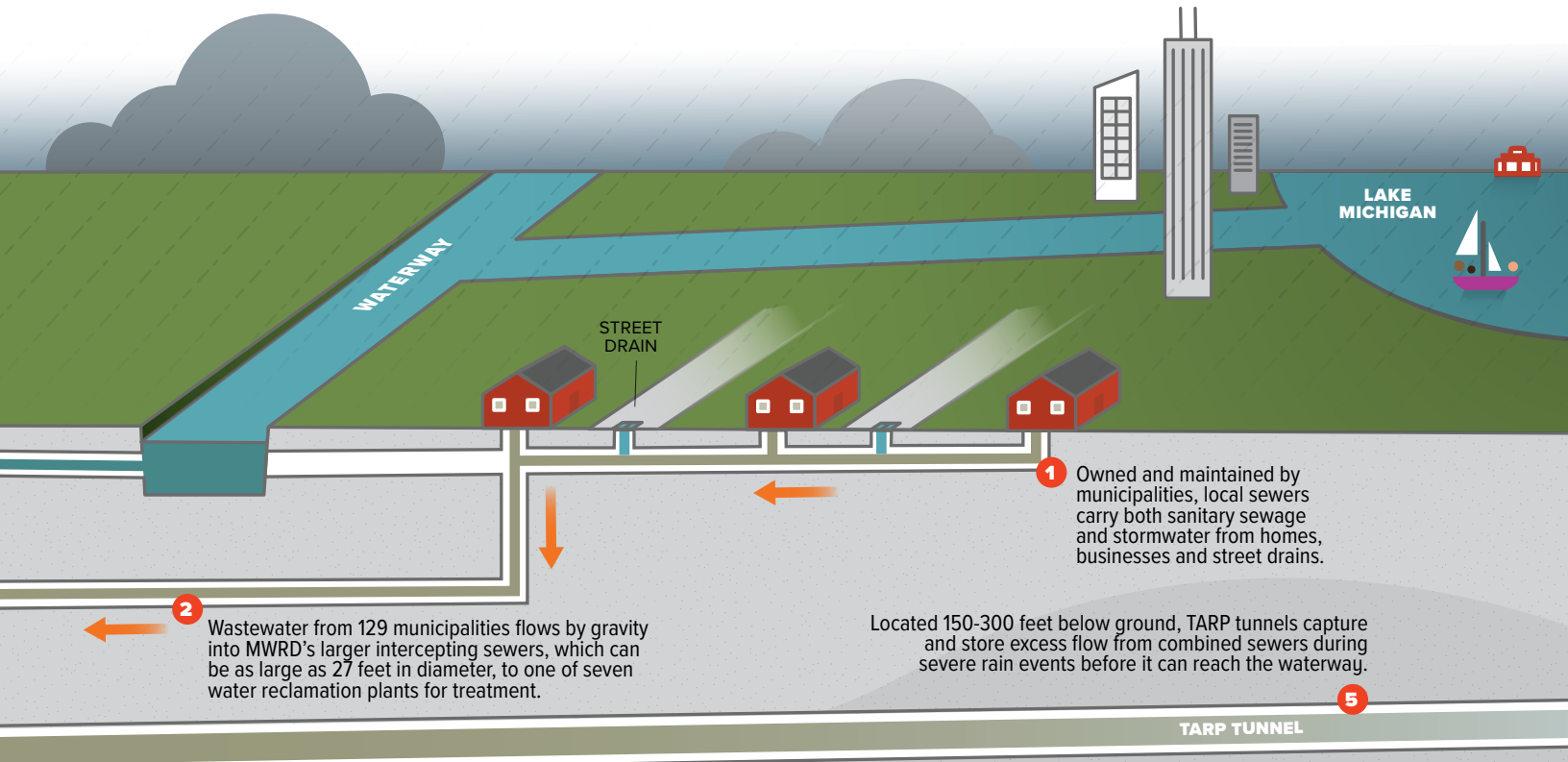
**Calumet**  
Chicago  
430 MGD

**Kirie**  
Des Plaines  
110 MGD

**Egan**  
Schaumburg  
50 MGD

**Hanover Park**  
Hanover Park  
22 MGD

**Lemont**  
Lemont  
4 MGD



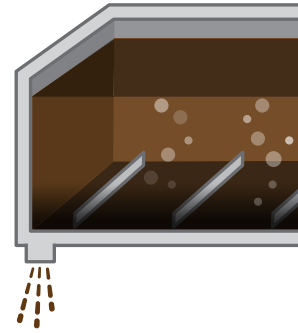
# Water Treatment Process

The WRPs mimic the purification process that occurs naturally in rivers, condensing what would take one or two weeks to less than 12 hours.



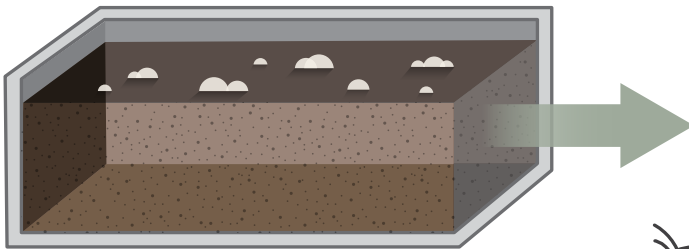
## 1. PRELIMINARY TREATMENT: COARSE SCREEN

A screening process utilizes large combs that rake through coarse screens to remove large objects which are deposited on conveyor belts and taken to landfills. The screens are a first line of defense to protect pumps from items that range from unwanted trash to huge tree limbs.



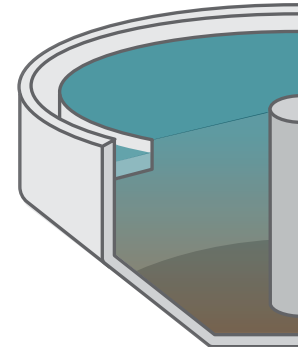
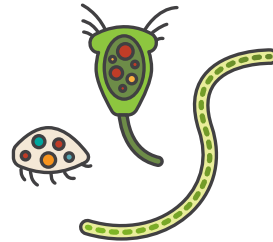
## 2. AERATED GRIT TANK

Next, pumps move water to aerated grit tanks where suspended materials are aerated, while grit, sand and other heavy materials settle. A conveyor scrapes the larger material on the bottom and takes it to a landfill.



## 4. SECONDARY TREATMENT

Next, water enters the aeration tanks that receive pumped, filtered air and a carefully maintained population of microorganisms, collectively called "activated sludge." These organisms break down the remaining suspended solids and remove soluble organics, ammonia, and, at some WRPs, phosphorus, and aggregate themselves to settle in the final settling tank.



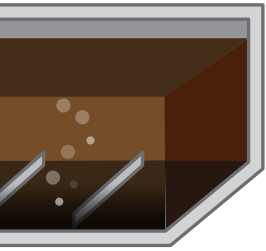
## 5. FINAL SETTLING TANK

In the final settling tanks, liquid from aeration tanks flows to the center of the tank. Solids sink to the bottom and are collected in a central drain. About 97 percent of the solids are removed in the settling tanks, while the remainder is sent to solidification. The top of the tank is now clean and ready for tertiary treatment.

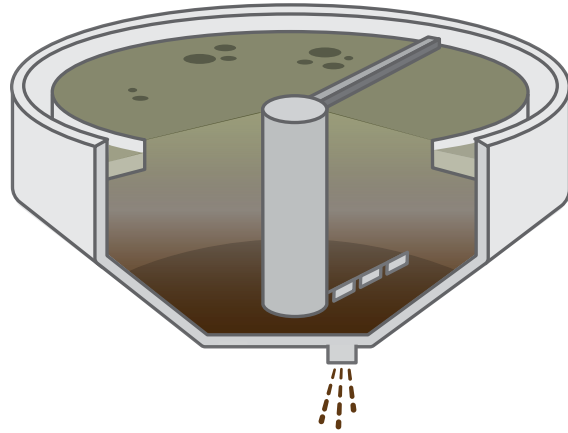
### WEST SIDE PRIMARY SETTLING TANKS

In recent years, the MWRD has upgraded its infrastructure at Stickney WRP with nine 160-foot diameter primary settling tanks and six 132-foot long aerated grit tanks, associated support facilities, service tunnels and conduits. These new tanks and treatment equipment replaced labor-intensive tanks that had been in use since 1928. This major upgrade provides a significant increase in digester gas production that will cover energy costs. The new tanks also increase and improve grit removal, protecting downstream piping and equipment, and reduce water recycling as well as odors that will be better captured and removed to support our goal of being a responsive neighbor to the communities we serve.



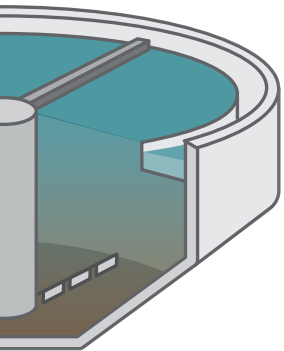


tanks. The air bubbles keep lighter  
d gravel sink to the bottom. A  
the bottom into a drain. It is then

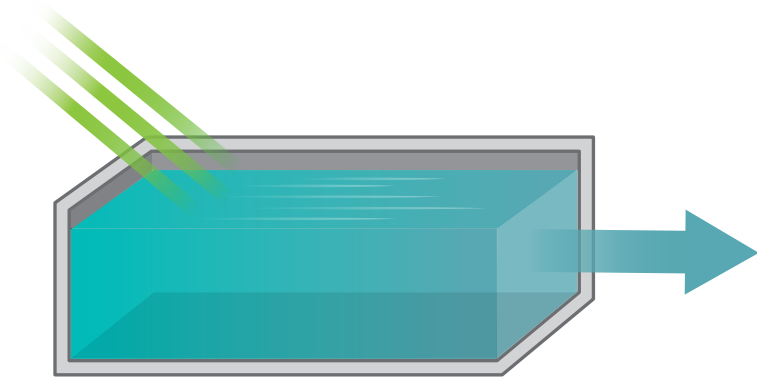


### 3. PRIMARY TREATMENT

The water now flows into primary settling tanks. A revolving conveyor with slats skims off the floating fats and oils while solids settle to bottom. The slats push the solids to a drain so that they can be conveyed to a solids treatment process. The floating fats and oils are moved to a drain and then they are sent to a landfill.

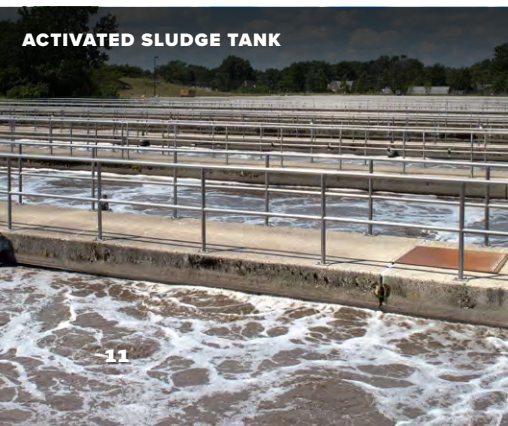


ation tanks flows by gravity through  
bottom where revolving blades scrape  
e solids are sent back to aeration  
s treatment process. The water at  
ly for discharging to the waterway or



### 6. TERTIARY TREATMENT

During disinfection, the MWRD uses a variety of measures at different WRPs to add a final layer of treatment before water is released into neighboring waterways. The DNA of microbes are deactivated using a chlorination/de-chlorination application process or an ultraviolet (UV) light disinfection system that prevents them from reproducing or growing. These disinfection processes drastically improve the microbial quality of the water released by the MWRD.



ACTIVATED SLUDGE TANK



SETTLING TANK



ULTRAVIOLET DISINFECTION

# Recovering resources, transforming water and protecting the environment

Since 1889, the MWRD has protected the water environment, but our view of the treatment process has evolved, as new technology and new challenges have emerged.

We now see this transformation as a collection of raw resources that we can sustainably recover and reuse, while reducing our carbon footprint and improving the water environment. Resource recovery presents a new frontier that provides a return on investment that benefits taxpayers and the environment. To protect future generations, the MWRD also developed a Climate Action Plan that prioritizes carbon reduction in support of the MWRD's Strategic Plan.



## **WATER**

The MWRD returns treated water to the water cycle for reuse in many forms. In the future, changing economics may make it beneficial to distribute treated water for industrial use, cooling, or irrigation. When used appropriately, recycled water can satisfy many water demands. It presents financial savings while promoting water conservation resulting in the decrease of water withdrawals from Lake Michigan. In addition to being harnessed, water itself is also reused directly throughout the MWRD treatment process. On average, we reuse about 11 million gallons of water each day in pipeline flushing, blower motor cooling, post-centrifuge centrate flushing and tank cleaning. The MWRD is producing cleaner water for reuse than previous generations, thanks to the MWRD's Industrial Waste Division that controls pollutants that were formerly discharged back into the environment.

## **ENERGY**

Water is a meaningful source of energy. At our Lockport Powerhouse where the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal drops 38 feet into the Des Plaines River, hydroelectric power is generated and converted to clean, renewable electricity. It is one of dozens of measures that the MWRD is taking to control our energy future. For decades, we have been creating clean, renewable energy from organic material removed from the wastewater. Biogas that is produced in anaerobic digesters is used to fuel boilers which produce steam or hot water to heat buildings and processes at the WRPs. This renewable biogas offsets the need to purchase about 6 million therms of natural gas each year. We have been pursuing energy reduction activities, including complete building energy assessments, and optimizing the aeration processes through implementation of new sensor and computerized control technology.

**PHOTOS** (left to right): Water flows over a weir during treatment; the MWRD's Lockport Powerhouse has been generating hydroelectric power since 1907; MWRD biosolids are a sustainable fertilizer produced from the wastewater treatment process that captures the plant nutrients and carbon needed for healthy soils; an MWRD engineer inspects a nutrient recovery reactor at the Stickney Water Reclamation Plant.

## FULTON COUNTY

Although the MWRD's daily service area is confined to Cook County, we actively work with the agricultural community and other partners throughout the state to ensure water leaving our communities is not negatively impacting communities downstream. In keeping with our mission, and to be a good neighbor, the MWRD makes land it owns in Fulton County available to the agricultural sector, Illinois Farm Bureau and University of Illinois. The land serves as a live laboratory for conducting research and demonstrations for farmers to see best management practices and strategies to reduce nutrient loss on land that closely resembles actual farming operations. Point sources of nutrient discharge, like WRPs, and non-point sources, like the farming community, must work together to help the state meet national reduction goals for nutrient loss contributing to the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico, where oxygen levels are being depleted from the excess nutrients. The MWRD initially purchased the 13,500-acre site in 1970 to convert the former strip-mined land from a brownfield to a fertile farmland, as part of the award winning "Prairie Plan."



## BIOSOLIDS

The recovery and use of biosolids can also help to protect our planet. Biosolids are a sustainable and environmentally beneficial product derived from the water reclamation process. The MWRD annually produces approximately 150,000 tons of biosolids, which contain about 40,000 tons of carbon on average. Nearly all biosolids are beneficially reused. In addition to application on farmlands, we have provided our biosolids and biosolids compost as soil amendments for use at area golf courses, parks and athletic fields for decades. Biosolids improve soil structure, support microbes and sustain plants by adding organic matter and retaining nutrients. Applying these resources to land can also increase carbon storage in soil. By land applying these soil amendments, we can sequester about 47,000 tons of carbon dioxide annually, which is equivalent to taking about 10,000 vehicles off the road. By reusing them locally, we can also cut down on energy costs and carbon emissions to haul the product long distances to farmlands and landfills.

## NUTRIENTS

Recovering nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen can make them available for reuse while protecting our waterways from contamination. In 2016, our Stickney WRP opened the world's largest nutrient recovery facility that helps protect waterways by removing phosphorus previously released into the waterways. The facility recovers phosphorus and ammonia in the form of a slow-release, environmentally friendly fertilizer. The MWRD is committed to meeting new phosphorus discharge requirements at our water reclamation plants and we have completed a phosphorus assessment and reduction plan to identify unnatural plant or algae growth that could be caused by phosphorus in the Chicago Area Waterway System. We received a U.S. patent with our research partners for developing a system that harvest algae to recover nutrients and reduce carbon emissions from the treatment process. Recovered algae can be used in products like fertilizer, aviation fuel and bioplastics. ★



*A solar-powered aerator floats to the surface of water stored in the Thornton Composite Reservoir. Since becoming operational in 2015, the reservoir has prevented more than 59 billion gallons of combined sewage from entering the waterways. Thanks to the reservoir, there have been no sewer overflows in the Calumet River System since 2020.*

# Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP) mitigates flooding and improves water quality

The MWRD makes no small plans. We are building toward the conclusion of the nation's largest public works project in water quality improvement.

TARP reduces pollution in area waterways and Lake Michigan and mitigates street and basement sewage backup flooding. TARP provides billions of gallons of storage for floodwaters that formerly overwhelmed our streets, basements and riverbanks. It is needed now more than ever.

The MWRD and our partners devised TARP in the late 1960s to capture pollution that overflowed from local sewers that were previously designed to empty sewage into local waterways. Once complete, TARP will provide more than 17.5 billion gallons of storage capacity for combined sewer systems in a 360-square-mile area covering Chicago and 51 suburbs. As a result of TARP and other water quality enhancements, aquatic life is thriving in Chicago area waterways and area residents now see the river system as a major asset. TARP was the first system of its kind to address pollution and flooding problems and is now being emulated by cities around the world.

The TARP system, commonly known by Chicago area residents as “Deep Tunnel,” is comprised of a network of four tunnel systems and three cavernous reservoirs designed to hold untreated water until it can be cleaned at MWRD WRPs. The 109 miles of tunnels, which were completed in 2006, can be as wide as 33 feet in diameter and 150 to 300 feet below ground. The MWRD added another mile with the completion of the Des Plaines Inflow Tunnel in 2022. In 2015, the MWRD completed the world's largest combined sewer reservoir at the 7.9-billion-gallon Thornton Composite Reservoir. It will be surpassed in size when the

10-billion-gallon McCook Reservoir is completed.

The Grand Canyon of the south suburbs, the Thornton Composite Reservoir is so large that it could store 144 million rain barrels, enough to circle the earth 3.64 times when laid end to end. When completed, the McCook Reservoir will be able to hold another 182 million rain barrels, 55 gallons each. McCook Reservoir will be large enough to cover every square foot of the Loop in nearly 10 feet of standing water.

While the sheer size of these reservoirs and tunnels is impressive, so too is the impact of this infrastructure on area water quality and flood prevention. After the tunnels were brought into service, the average number of yearly combined sewer overflows (CSOs) were cut in half. The Thornton Composite Reservoir and the 350-million-gallon Majewski Reservoir in the northwest suburbs have gone a step further and nearly eliminated CSOs. The Calumet TARP system, serving 556,000 people living in 14 municipalities, has captured more than 60 billion gallons of CSO volume, more than 99 percent of the volume of water that enters the system since the reservoir was placed into service. Since the start of 2018, McCook has captured more than 125 billion gallons of water.

Stage I of McCook Reservoir, completed in 2017, is fully operational and can take on 3.5 billion gallons of water that previously overflowed throughout its massive 255-square-mile area. McCook Reservoir is estimated to provide more than \$175 million per year in benefits to 3.1 million people in 37 communities. ★

## MCCOOK RESERVOIR

The McCook Reservoir protects Chicago and 36 suburban communities from flooding and relieves each municipality of the burden of designing, building and operating its own system to capture and treat combined sewer overflows. Providing an outlet for two tunnel systems known as Mainstream and Des Plaines, the McCook Reservoir covers a wide footprint of protection from Kenilworth on the north and southwest to Bedford Park. The stored water is pumped from the reservoir to the Stickney Water Reclamation Plant to be cleaned and released.





## FINDING RELIEF

# The MWRD delivers solutions for managing stormwater and building a resilient Cook County

Water can be elusive and destructive. Before the MWRD can clean urban runoff, we first must collect that water. In recent years, the Chicago region has experienced historic weather patterns consisting of rain bursts that overwhelm local collection systems, making flooding a priority issue at the MWRD.

Given the region's flat terrain, impervious pavement, large population and history of flooding, our role in stormwater management has intensified. The MWRD's expertise in water pollution control and drainage led us to assume a flood control leadership role in the metropolitan area. After designing and constructing more than 30 flood control storage reservoirs and dozens of stream improvement projects, the MWRD became a natural fit to lead this charge against flooding. In 2004, the Illinois General Assembly enacted legislation formalizing and expanding the MWRD's role as the regional stormwater management agency for Cook County. Through this authority, the MWRD began planning the

design, construction, operation and maintenance of flood control facilities and related stormwater management projects. The new countywide authority required the MWRD to form six watershed planning councils and develop the Cook County Stormwater Management Plan. Approved by the MWRD's Board of Commissioners in 2007, this plan identifies the goals of the program, the guidelines for the detailed watershed plans, the parameters of the countywide program, and plan implementation. It also introduces regulatory concepts later addressed in the Watershed Management Ordinance (WMO). Ad-

opted in 2013, the WMO regulates sewer construction within MWRD's service area and development within suburban Cook County. The WMO provides guidelines for improving stormwater drainage and detention conditions for new development. It also ensures protection of wetlands and riparian areas, reduces soil erosion and prevents future development projects from exacerbating flooding. Stormwater management allows the MWRD to look at projects holistically, like in Robbins where a community partnership has leveraged new opportunities for economic, social, environmental and recreational growth. It has

*This green alley in Maywood is part of the MWRD's Green Infrastructure Partnership Program. The MWRD has partnered with dozens of municipalities to construct permeable alleys and parking lots that capture stormwater, mitigate flooding and demonstrate green infrastructure benefits.*



also spawned collaborative efforts between the MWRD and local partners through major projects, such as the Addison Creek Reservoir and Channel improvements that will benefit Northlake, Melrose Park, Stone Park, Bellwood, Westchester and Broadview by reducing flooding to approximately 2,200 structures along Addison Creek. Other projects such as expansions of Buffalo Creek Reservoir near Buffalo Grove and Melvina Ditch Reservoir in Burbank benefit hundreds of homes and businesses, much like the impacts experienced from the MWRD's Heritage Park Flood Control Facility in Wheeling. Flood control and streambank stabilization projects at Natalie Creek in Midlothian and Oak Forest, Cherry Creek in Flossmoor and Tinley Creek in Crestwood improved conveyance and protect communities, while the Albany Park Stormwater Diversion Tunnel relieved this Chicago neighborhood from the threat of catastrophic 100-year flood events that occur with more regularity.

The MWRD's Stormwater Management Program also expedites smaller conceptual and shovel-ready projects to protect Cook County communities from flooding. Each year we hold a call for projects as part of the Local Stormwater Partnership Program to fund work that address flooding and drainage concerns. These projects utilize a variety



of traditional engineered solutions such as localized detention, upsizing critical storm sewers and culverts, pumping stations, and establishing drainage ways, alongside green infrastructure.

In addition, the MWRD is working with local communities to provide partial funding towards the construction of green infrastructure (GI) installations on public property. GI projects are designed to use natural landscaping to manage water and provide environmental and community benefits. Each year we select GI projects to invest in through our call for projects. These projects vary in size and scope and can include roadside bioswales and rain gardens, green roofs, permeable pavement alleys, green street-scapes, and eco-orchards.

Design and construction of each installation are monitored by MWRD to optimize benefits.

The MWRD has more than 260 projects in some phase of design or construction aimed at flood reduction and community resilience, and the totality of these projects are protecting or removing more than 19,000 structures. These projects include local and regional stormwater management projects and green infrastructure partnerships among other flooding mitigation initiatives. Other ambitious programs include improving Chicago schoolyards to better manage water through a partnership known as Space to Grow® and a flood-prone property acquisition program that removes homes built in the floodplain. We have also distributed more than 150,000 rain barrels and 100,000 tree saplings to offset the regional loss of ash trees and soak up more stormwater. We realize that we each can play a role diminishing our stormwater challenges. ★



Native plants emerge at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Sarah Street in Franklin Park where the MWRD contributed toward the installation of more than 1,000 square yards of rain gardens at intersections in Franklin Park to create inviting businesses spaces that also reduce flooding.

# A neighbor you can count on

Protecting our water environment requires commitment, expertise, innovation and a relentless drive to be the best in the industry, but the MWRD cannot accomplish this alone.

That is why we also strive to be a responsive neighbor that engages with the public on several critical water-related issues that improve the quality of life for all. A hallmark of the MWRD's Strategic Plan is to engage with the community to position the MWRD as a critical community asset and to ensure that the MWRD is a responsive and inclusive business partner. In this role, we are expanding partnerships and increasing diverse participation in MWRD contracts. Here are only a few actions we take throughout the year to add value to the daily integral services we provide as a utility of the future.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Under the goals of our Strategic Plan, we highlight a renewed commitment to community engagement. We open our doors throughout the year to welcome thousands of visitors to tour our facilities and continue to connect with other guests through our virtual tours that help educate everyone on the work of the MWRD. Our talented commissioners and staff of scientists, engineers and water experts also regularly perform outreach to the communities we serve. They speak in classrooms, take leadership roles in professional organizations and extend the MWRD mission to new audiences. To reach younger audiences and educate them on our roles protecting our water, we published an award-winning children's book and animation entitled "Where Does IT Go?" We are also out in the community removing debris



MWRD scientists interact with campers taking a tour of the Calumet Water Reclamation Plant. Each year the MWRD hosts thousands of visitors, including many students who are encouraged to take ownership of their water environment and consider STEM careers.

from waterways and maintaining small streams. We provide bio-solids, tree saplings, discounted rain barrels and milkweed seeds to support endangered monarch butterflies while encouraging native plant growth to absorb more stormwater. We have also planted milkweed throughout our landscaping and earned monarch waystation certification.

## UNWANTED MEDICATION AND CONTAMINANTS

Throughout the year, the MWRD collects unwanted medicine to prevent it from entering our water environment. Working with the medical community and the general public, the MWRD has sought ways to reduce the release of pharmaceutical waste into the environ-

A crew removes a logjam in the North Branch of the Chicago River as part of the MWRD's Small Stream Maintenance Program.



Graves Elementary School students provide input with the MWRD during a community workshop for a new green schoolyard.



ment and issue reminders not to flush unused medications down the drain, nor toss expired drugs in the garbage. We collaborate with regional partners to address road salt applications and chloride levels in area waterways. We also educate the public on the damaging effects of microplastics, pesticides and waste runoff that can harm our water environment.

## **PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION**

We improve public recreation spaces on MWRD-owned land to draw more people closer to the waterfront. We also provide ample open spaces next door to our plants and at the site of stormwater management projects that work to manage excessive stormwater and increase recreational opportunities. We lease large parcels of land to park districts, municipalities and forest preserve districts for a nominal fee to enhance public access to waterways, develop parks, hiking and bicycle trails



MWRD aquatic biologists and research technicians survey the Chicago Area Waterways to study fish populations.

and passive recreational use along the waterways, including the 312 RiverRun on the North Side, Cal-Sag Trail in the south suburbs and Centennial Trail near Willow Springs. To complete the hilly 11-mile segment of the Centennial Trail, the MWRD contributed 1.8 million cubic yards of overburden (dirt) excavated from the neighboring McCook Reservoir. In total, the MWRD makes more than 8,000 acres of land available for recreation and green space. Our impressive real estate portfolio also ushers in a financial return for taxpayers while addressing our mission of stormwater management and waterfront access.

## **SERVICE EXCELLENCE**

We alert the public to minimize water use on rainy days to reserve space in the sewers and warn them of sewer overflows. We are responsive and have a sense of urgency when the public informs us of waterway pollution, dumping, blockages and odors through our online Citizen Incident Reporting System at [mwrdd.org](http://mwrdd.org), or our Spanish language hotline at 855-323-4801. The MWRD is investing millions of dollars in new odor control technologies and training staff to better address odor control. We are working with environmental partners to establish new goals in reducing nutrients to create cleaner waterways locally and downstream to the Gulf of

Mexico. We are also increasing the recovery of valuable nutrients like phosphorus that has grown scarce throughout the world. We are documenting and analyzing an increasing diversity of fish species in the waterways. We are planting native prairie landscaping to show strong land stewardship, reduce the long-term cost of grounds maintenance, and serve as an example of a best management practice to infiltrate stormwater, increase biodiversity and wildlife habitat, and sequester carbon. We maintain this land through prescribed burns and enlist goats and sheep to trim back overgrowth and reduce our reliance on lawn mowers, herbicides and fuels. We are offering affordable rain barrels that capture rainwater and prevent it from entering and overwhelming our collection systems. We are distributing free oak tree saplings to help restore the canopy of trees that has been threatened in recent years.

Water can be taken for granted. When it is poured down drains, it can be forgotten. But water plays a vital role in all of our lives, so the MWRD works around the clock to make a better environment now and for future generations. Sometimes it is our actions that speak louder than words, and it is these actions that make the MWRD the utility of the future you can rely on every day. ★

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

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**You can help reduce basement backups  
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**COVER PHOTO:** MWRD aquatic biologists patrol the Cal-Sag Channel for an electrofishing survey to study aquatic life by the MWRD's Sidestream Elevated Pool Aeration (SEPA) Station in Blue Island. In 2024, the MWRD marked 50 years of fish monitoring in the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS). As water quality improved over that time, the MWRD noted a significant rise in fish populations.