



# Press Release

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## Understanding COVID-19 through wastewater: MWRD to participate in national sewage surveillance project

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has approved plans for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) to participate in a nationwide sewage surveillance project to conduct SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) wastewater testing.

On Dec. 9, the MWRD was notified that five of its water reclamation plants (WRPs) were accepted to participate in the first phase of the HHS project, which will test wastewater from treatment plants that serve 10 percent of the U.S. population. The project, for which the HHS contracted to AquaVitas, will include sampling, analysis, and uploading analytical data twice per week for six weeks. The project will generate wastewater surveillance data for public health agencies to use at a national level.

“We stand ready at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago to participate and lend our support to this critical research,” said MWRD Vice President Barbara McGowan. “Given our exemplary record of 131 years of service and stewardship to public health, we are eager to partner with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to learn more about COVID-19 and wastewater.”

Samples will be taken from the MWRD’s Calumet WRP in Chicago, Egan WRP in Schaumburg, Kirie WRP in Des Plaines, O’Brien WRP in Skokie, and Stickney WRP in the Stickney/Cicero area. Plans for a second phase will expand the project to enroll additional treatment plants to cover at least 30 percent of the U.S. population.

This is the third sewage surveillance project that the MWRD is currently participating in, including two separate research studies that will shed light on a retrospective understanding of how COVID-19



*Lab technicians with the MWRD are handling wastewater sampling for three separate surveillance projects to help gain a retrospective understanding of how COVID-19 spread in communities might be detected in sewers.*

spread in communities might be detected in sewers. Although the MWRD does not own local sewers that would allow it to conduct a detailed surveillance at the local community level, traces of viral RNA sampled in the water can effectively survey communities for potential spread and hot spots and give public health agencies an edge in evaluating the presence of the virus and implementing additional strategies.

Since March, the MWRD has been collecting and freezing samples each week at as many as six WRPs for researchers at Stanford University and the University of Michigan to help them develop models to predict the prevalence of COVID-19. Locally, the MWRD has partnered with Argonne National Laboratory, Northwestern University and the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) to provide samples from three WRPs since October. This research team is an-

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## Understanding COVID-19 through wastewater CONTINUED

alyzing samples, evaluating data and communicating findings to local public health departments.

“Thank you to the U.S. Department of Human Health and Human Services and AquaVitas and our many research partners for their continuous collaboration on sewage surveillance,” said MWRD Commissioner Cameron Davis. “We stand committed to maintaining the best quality control in sample collection to ensure reliable data production and future understanding of the spread of the COVID-19

virus. We look forward to including other plants in future research.”

Despite the pandemic, the MWRD continues to provide water reclamation operations and stormwater management services around the clock to ensure the region’s wastewater is cleaned and that public health and the environment are protected.

A fact sheet about MWRD’s work to aid in COVID-19 research can be found here: [https://mwrdd.org/sites/default/files/documents/Sewage%20Surveillance\\_FS\\_201222.pdf](https://mwrdd.org/sites/default/files/documents/Sewage%20Surveillance_FS_201222.pdf)

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*Established in 1889, the MWRD ([www.mwrdd.org](http://www.mwrdd.org)) is an award winning, special purpose government agency responsible for used water treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.*