



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

# Press Release

Allison Fore

Public Affairs Specialist

312.751.6633

public.affairs@mwr.org

100 East Erie Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611

For immediate release **November 27, 2012**

## Chicago Wilderness panel sheds light on future of Chicago Area Waterways

The Chicago River is quickly becoming Chicago's second waterfront, and the river's past, present and future was the focus of a panel held during the 2012 Chicago Wilderness Congress at the University of Illinois at Chicago on Nov. 15. Chicago Wilderness is a regional alliance dedicated to protecting nature and enriching life.

The "Reimagining the Chicago and Calumet Rivers for the 21st Century and Beyond" session featured Dr. Reuben Keller, Professor of Environmental Science at Loyola University Chicago, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) Commissioner Debra Shore and Executive Director David St. Pierre, and Josh Ellis, Program Director, Metropolitan Planning Council.

Keller provided a historical perspective of the region and pointed out how the quality of the water in the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS) has dramatically improved over the past 123 years, making kayaking and other water sports possible. Commissioner Shore explained MWRD's role in developing and improving the CAWS, beginning with the need to dilute the waste and sewage that flowed into streets, ditches and then the Chicago River.

"Typhoid fever and cholera posed significant public health threats so to prevent future outbreaks, the Illinois legislature established the Sanitary District of Chicago in 1889, now the MWRD," Commissioner Shore explained. "The District broke ground on the main channel of the Sanitary and Ship Canal three years later and completed the project by 1900, reversing the flow of the Chicago River. Water was diverted from Lake Michigan to dilute sewage and flush it downstream."



*The "Reimagining the Chicago and Calumet Rivers for the 21st Century and Beyond" session at the Chicago Wilderness Congress featured (L-R) Josh Ellis, Program Director, Metropolitan Planning Council; MWRD Commissioner Debra Shore; MWRD Executive Director David St. Pierre; and, Dr. Reuben Keller, Professor of Environmental Science at Loyola University Chicago.*

Construction of seven wastewater treatment plants followed over the years. Now the MWRD is installing disinfection equipment at the Calumet and Terrence J. O'Brien (formerly the North Side) Water Reclamation Plants. Once the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan's Thornton Reservoir comes online by 2015, the quality of the CAWS and incidents of flooding will drastically improve.

St. Pierre discussed the MWRD's plans for the future and the improvements that will benefit water quality. "The MWRD is working with the University of Illinois to address the lingering effects of the pollution that persists at Bubbly Creek," St. Pierre said.

From 1865 through 1971, the Union stock yards used Bubbly Creek as a dumping ground for animal carcasses, grease and other discards. The water remains

polluted, still bubbling methane and hydrogen sulfide gases which escape from byproducts of the decomposing materials.

The MWRD is developing methods for recovery and reuse of phosphorus and nitrogen from the wastewater treatment process. "In excessive amounts, these nutrients impact water quality, but if they are removed from the water stream, they can be returned to the soil as fertilizers for agriculture production," said St. Pierre.

Ellis pointed out the important role the CAWS serves as a transportation venue for barges that carry loads which otherwise would be traversing area highways via truck. He also explained that the MWRD leases its properties at low cost to the public, "providing opportunities for improving the quality of life for area residents and helping communities along both the Chicago and Calumet rivers."

*Established in 1889, the MWRD ([www.mwr.org](http://www.mwr.org)) is an award-winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois. **Our water environment, Take it personally.***