



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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MWRD celebrates 125th Anniversary

The year is 1871. The smell of charred wood permeates throughout Chicago as the last embers of the Great Fire are finally extinguished. The remnants of what use to be a bustling city center are carried by horse and cart to Lake Michigan for disposal. Also flowing into the lake is the Chicago River, a repository of animal carcasses, refuse, sewage and stench. Eighteen years later, the Illinois General Assembly enacted the Sanitary District Enabling Act on May 29, 1889, establishing the Sanitary District with the purpose of protecting our water supply and managing wastewater.

Since 1889, the Sanitary District, later named the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD), has worked to improve water quality and prevent flooding in our region.

The young agency's first initiative was to reverse the flow of the polluted Chicago River away from Lake Michigan, the source of the city's drinking water, by excavating the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal.

Excavating the 28 mile canal was a project of unprecedented scale and difficulty. It took 8,500 workers eight years to complete. Many of the same methods and techniques were used a few years later for the construction of the Panama Canal. The Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal is often referred to as the "canal that saved Chicago." Without it, the city was in danger of drowning in its own wastewater and would not exist as we know it today. The importance of the canal is memorialized in the flag of the city of Chicago, adopted in 1917. The top blue stripe on the flag represents the lake and the North Branch of the Chicago River and the bottom stripe represents the South Branch and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal.

The waterway system protected the lake from the river's water, but the river itself was still famously polluted. In the early 20th century, the MWRD began developing wastewater treatment technology and building water reclamation plants to clean wastewater before it reached the waterways. Today, the MWRD operates seven water reclamation plants with outstanding records of compliance with water quality standards and is leading the way in developing sustainable new treatment processes.

Historically, the MWRD's treatment plants worked to clean wastewater in dry weather, but during rain storms, the sewer system could become overwhelmed and overflow to waterways. The MWRD began work on the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP) or "Deep Tunnel" in the early 1970s to address this problem. TARP consists of over 100 miles of tunnels as large as 33 feet in diameter and vast reservoirs to capture stormwater and sewer overflows. The "tunnel" portion of TARP was completed in 2006 and is fully operational. The "reservoir" portion of TARP is currently under construction. Since it went online, TARP has greatly reduced combined sewer overflows, protected property and improved water quality. The system will be even more effective when the reservoirs are complete. Other cities around the world have followed the MWRD's lead and have undertaken similar deep tunnel projects to reduce combined sewer overflows.

In 2004, the MWRD was granted stormwater management authority for Cook County. Since then, we have embarked on constructing major regional flood control projects throughout the county. We are also exploring ways to work with all 125 communities using available technologies to decrease flooding in major rain events which we are experiencing on a more routine basis. To prevent future commercial, municipal, and residential development and redevelopment projects from exacerbating flooding, the Board approved the Watershed Management Ordinance which provides uniform stormwater management regulations for Cook County. The WMO took effect on May 1.

As the MWRD continues through our second century, we are proud of being the leading wastewater treatment agency in the country. As the industry evolves, we are using emerging technologies and processes to support our mission, our customers and our water environment. We are pursuing sustainable practices, embracing partnerships and implementing available technologies while working together with communities to eliminate flooding.

The work we started in 1889 made the Chicago region habitable. The cutting edge work we are pursuing today will continue to transform and shape the wastewater industry in the future.

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Our Water Environment: Take it personally

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