



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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Fun on the Cal-Sag Channel shines light on cleaner MWRD waterways



Teams compete in a dragon boat race in the Cal-Sag Channel in Blue Island.



Paddlers work in unison as a drummer encourages the team to continue paddling to victory on the Cal-Sag Channel in Blue Island.

They rowed, they drummed, they conquered--and they even plunged into the Cal-Sag Channel during the Chicago Southland Dragon Boat Festival to highlight the work of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD), city of Blue Island and other Southland communities to improve water quality in the Cal-Sag Channel.

The 2nd Annual Chicago Southland Dragon Boat Festival on June 3 featured 14 teams competing for top honors in three separate divisions, while the 2nd Annual Cal-Sag Plunge convened local waterway experts and trail enthusiasts. Diane Banta, National Park Service; Steve Buchtel, president, Illinois Trails; Josh Ellis, Metropolitan Planning Council; and David St. Pierre, Executive Director, MWRD, jumped into the channel to raise funds for the completion of the Cal-Sag Trail. The thousands of dollars raised will benefit Friends of the Cal-Sag Trail, which is working to help complete the remaining 13 miles of the 26-mile trail that extends from Lemont to the Burnham Greenway near the Indiana border.

"We applaud the festival organizers, dragon boat racers, plungers and our own David St. Pierre for diving in and demonstrating the fun we can have on our waterways and how our improvements in water quality have led to new recreation and economic opportunities along our waterway system," said MWRD President Mariyana Spyropoulos. "New advancements in the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, disinfection technologies and aeration stations have allowed us to create healthier waterways and places we can all enjoy."

The dragon boat races drew teams from all over the Chicago area and from as far away as Racine, Wisconsin. Some teams were comprised of businesses, organizations, schools and clubs, while others were simply groups of neighbors and friends. The races also brought out the community that helped make the event possible, organizers said.

"The festival was all about showcasing the best of Blue Island and kicking off summer with a fun, family-friendly event that celebrated teamwork, *(continued)*

Fun on the Cal-Sag Channel *(continued)*

community, and gave people a chance to experience recreation on a beautiful waterway right in the heart of the Chicago Southland,” said Sara Brown, a Blue Island resident and festival organizer who owns the Blue Island Development Company with her husband Kevin Brown. “We were thrilled with the collaborative spirit we experienced in planning the event with MWRD, Chicago Southland CVB, City of Blue Island, Friends of the Chicago River, Friends of the Cal-Sag Trail, U.S. Coast Guard, Blue Island Park District, area businesses and sponsors, and even happier with the turnout on race day, all of the teams, volunteers, vendors, and attendees. We can’t say thank you enough, and we can’t wait for next year.”

Besides plenty of people visiting the Cal-Sag Channel, there are plenty of fish. The number of fish species found in the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS) has drastically increased since the 1970s when monitoring of the fish population first began. From 10 known species in 1974, that number has ballooned to 76 in 2016, including 59 that have been found in the CAWS

since 2000. Plunging into the CAWS would be unheard of decades ago, but the Channel began a remarkable transformation 20 years ago when the MWRD began operating the Sidestream Elevated Pool Aeration (SEPA) stations along the Cal-Sag and Calumet River. Oxygenating the water began to restore ecology to the channel and opened the door to imagining new ideas for the southern corridor, like the Cal-Sag Trail. The SEPA stations near the Cal-Sag Channel and Calumet River add up to 25 tons of oxygen a day to the CAWS and protect wildlife habitats. In addition, the MWRD’s Thornton Composite Reservoir, which came into service in 2015, has drastically reduced the number of combined sewer overflows in the Calumet River System, leading to cleaner water.

“Improvements in water quality have created many new economic and recreational opportunities along our waterways,” said MWRD Commissioner Debra Shore. “We support efforts to complete the Cal-Sag Trail, and we invite boaters, hikers and cyclists to enjoy the portions of the trail that are already complete.”

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Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

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