



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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MWRD staff honored with two international awards from Water Environment Federation

Three staff members from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) have received distinguished honors from the international Water Environment Federation (WEF) for their work to improve wastewater treatment technology and to educate the public about the MWRD.

The Ralph Fuhrman Medal for Outstanding Water Quality Academic-Practice Collaboration for advancing algae technology and research with partners from Iowa State University and Gross-Wen Technologies (GWT) was presented to Principal Environmental Scientist Dr. Kuldip Kumar and Assistant Director of Monitoring and Research Tom Kunetz, who retired earlier this year. The award for Public Communication and Outreach Program was presented to MWRD Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Officer Allison Fore. Ms. Fore and the Public Affairs team execute strategic communications to raise the agency’s profile while educating the public about the MWRD and the importance of protecting the water environment.

“We are thrilled that our staff has been recognized for their outstanding achievements that spark innovation in wastewater treatment, resource recovery, and water quality improvement while acknowledging efforts to communicate all of this brilliant work to the public,” said MWRD President Kari K. Steele.

GWT developed the technology at Iowa State University for agricultural applications and was adapted for algal-based treatment of wastewater at the MWRD’s O’Brien Water Reclamation Plant (WRP) greenhouse in Skokie. The revolving algae biofilm system removes phosphorus, nitrogen, and other nutrients from wastewater, while producing algae biomass from waste nutrients and carbon dioxide captured from the air. The algae could remove at least 50 percent of phosphorus from wastewater and can be harvested and commoditized for production of bioplastics, biochemicals, biofuels, pharmaceuticals and dyes; or used as fertilizer or as aquaculture feed. The partners also received a major grant from the U.S. Department of Energy’s Office of Technology Transitions to continue developing a sustainable nutrient recovery system that uses a unique alga harvesting process as well as the Innovation Collaboration of the Year Award from the Algae Biomass Organization

“This technology may one day allow us to build a true circular economy,” said MWRD Commissioner Debra Shore. “The algae technology converts our wastewater treatment process into a way to capture and reuse energy, nutrients, and other important resources. It’s hard to overstate how exciting this is.”

“Recent advancements in technology like this are enabling us to restore ecosystems through removal of harmful algal



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WEF Awards *cont.*

blooms, reducing fertilizer use through soil amendments made from algae biomass, and for highly effective wastewater treatment while reducing carbon emissions and water pollution” said Dr. Kumar.

Ms. Fore’s leadership in the management of public information, digital media services, community relations, graphic design, and internal and external communications has sparked the interest of stakeholders who are partners in managing stormwater and preventing water pollution. Ms. Fore implemented and manages the MWRD’s social media strategy and developed a speaker’s bureau to engage the public with a special emphasis placed on outreach to students to generate interest in STEM careers. Prior to the pandemic, the department participated in thousands of community events and hosted facility tours but have since mobilized to perform virtual outreach and connect with new audiences.

Ms. Fore and her department have produced innovative educational brochures, fact sheets, and coloring books to help staff educate the public about the MWRD’s work and areas of responsibility. Ms. Fore has made a special effort

to support biosolids and compost marketing efforts by implementing the MWRD’s annual Sustainability Summits that educate the public while highlighting successful biosolids users and sustainable landscaping projects.

Ms. Fore has led the team’s work to develop time-lapse videos, from the first fill of McCook Reservoir to documenting the conversion of asphalt covered parking lots into vibrant recreational and stormwater retaining amenities for schools to increase awareness of the importance of water conservation and stormwater management. She also pursued the development of two staff members becoming FAA-certified drone operators, and this footage is used for multiple purposes by the agency and by partnering organizations. Ms. Fore and her team take thousands of photos and videos, and research and scan historical photos.

“I am thrilled to receive this honor and am fortunate to benefit from the support, hard work and commitment of my Public Affairs team, my fellow employees, colleagues and the MWRD Board of Commissioners,” Ms. Fore said.

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Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

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