



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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MWRD's native prairie landscaping requires scorching maintenance but recoups major environmental benefits

In its mission to protect the water environment, it's not always the water resources that the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) must maintain. Between seven water reclamation plants (WRP) and 23 pumping stations, the MWRD has significant ground to manage, and it accomplishes this by incorporating more than 50 acres of native prairie landscaping (NPL), which work to retain stormwater and help improve area water quality.

Recently, the MWRD performed prescribed burns throughout its NPL at its water reclamation plants. The burn helps release nutrients into the soil to encourage growth for next spring. It also eliminates woody plants and weeds with shallow roots, leaving the native prairie forbs and deep-rooted grasses to thrive in the post-burn season. The NPL provides numerous benefits to the environment.

"We realize our commitment to the native prairie landscaping takes time and resources to develop, but it demonstrates responsible land stewardship and our commitment to responsible stormwater management, carbon sequestration and healthy biodiversity on the grounds we manage," said MWRD President Kari K. Steele.

Licensed personnel following local and state regulations conduct prescribed burns in the late fall or early spring when the thatch is dry, when wind conditions are safe and after neighboring property owners have been properly notified. The MWRD's 50 acres of NPL serve as a form of green infrastructure soaking up stormwater



A prescribed burn at the MWRD's Stickney Water Reclamation helps the native prairie regenerate a healthy return the following spring. As a result, more water is captured, and more carbon is sequestered.

to improve local water quality, sequester carbon, and increase biodiversity and wildlife.

"Our native prairie landscapes meet our mission to protect public health and safety and protect the quality of the water supply and environment in the region," said MWRD Commissioner Eira L. Corral Sepúlveda. "The NPL offers ecological benefits, conserves water, minimizes pollution in the urban streams and waterways, provides maintenance savings to taxpayers and presents an opportunity to educate the communities we serve."

Among the native plants is an abundance of milkweed that the MWRD has planted to assist the monarch butterfly population, which has declined due to habitat loss and climate change, resulting from development, poor land management practices, *(continued)*

MWRD's native prairie landscaping requires maintenance, *cont.*



Licensed contractors manage a safe and effective prescribed burn at the MWRD's Stickney Water Reclamation Plant (WRP) to maintain a healthy native prairie landscape. While one worker ignites a flame another is working to extinguish and control the flame.

illegal logging and heavy reliance on pesticides and herbicides in the United States. The MWRD restricts the use of these chemicals on its land.

For staff's efforts in planting milkweed, nectar sources and providing shelter to foster a thriving habitat for the monarch butterfly, the MWRD's Stickney Water Reclamation Plant was recently certified with a monarch waystation by the Monarch Watch program. Stickney staff have seeded 12 acres of milkweed, planted more than 500 trees, and expanded the NPL by 1.65 acres for a total of 15.69 total acres between Stickney and the MWRD's Mainstream Pumping Station.

At several of its facilities for the last three years, the MWRD has employed goats and sheep for vegetation control. The herd trims overgrowth and invasive species and maintains the NPL. The herd's work is critical because it provides an environmental alternative to maintain the ground outside MWRD facilities by reducing

the MWRD's reliance on herbicides and fuel to power mowers. The herd will graze on dozens of acres of shrubs, plants and other overgrowth with each animal clearing at least 250 square feet of vegetation per day.

The MWRD began the NPL project in 2003 with the conversion of more than 31 acres of conventional turf grass to native prairie plants at MWRD water reclamation plants. Native prairie grasses and forbs, being well adapted to the local environment, thrive with minimum care and maintenance and thus landscaping with native prairie plants is a better alternative. Unlike the NPL, urban landscapes are commonly vegetated with non-native Kentucky bluegrass turf, which requires extensive care and maintenance, including fertilizers and herbicides. Runoff from turf grass landscapes then becomes a major source of pollution. During a prescribed burn, any remaining seeds can drop, the soil is returned to black and invasives can be eliminated.

Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

Established in 1889, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) is an award-winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois. Learn more at mwrld.org.