Representative Policy Board
Land Use Committee
South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority
Lake Saltonstall Water Treatment Plant, 1 Salstonstall Parkway, Branford

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AGENDA

Regular Meeting of Wednesday, September 11, 2024, at 4:30 p.m.

1. Safety Moment
2. Approval of Minutes – August 14, 2024
3. Water Chestnut Harvest Update: Josh Tracy and Will Henley
4. Updates on land and RWA properties, including invasive species update
5. Other land items
6. Volunteers to attend Regional Water Authority meetings on October 24, 2024, November 21, 2024, December 19, 2024, and January 23, 2025
7. Next regular meeting - Wednesday, October 9, 2024, at 4:30 p.m.
8. Adjourn

To view meeting documents, please visit http://tinyurl.com/tvu5cy9m. For questions, contact the board office at 203-401-2515 or by email at jslubowski@rwater.com.

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Representative Policy Board
Land Use Committee
South Central Connecticut Regional Water District
August 14, 2024

Minutes

The regular meeting of the Land Use Committee ("Committee") of the Representative Policy Board ("RPB"), of the South Central Connecticut Regional Water District ("RWA"), took place on Wednesday, August 14, 2024, at the Seymour Wellfield, 151 Roosevelt Drive, Seymour, Connecticut. Chair Levine presided.

Committee Members Present: M. Levine, P. Betkoski, P. DeSantis, B. Eitzer, M. Horbal, G. Malloy, J. Oslander and Jamie Mowat Young

RPB: R. Harvey and T. Clifford

Authority: D. Borowy and C. LaMarr

Management: Jim Hill, Sunny Lakshminarayanan, and J. Triana

Chair Levine called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. He reviewed the Safety Moment distributed to members.

On motion made by Mr. Malloy and seconded by Mr. Horbal, the Committee voted unanimously to approve the minutes of its July 10, 2024 meeting.

Mr. Lakshminarayanan, the RWA's Vice President of Engineering & Environmental Services, and Mr. Hill, the RWA's General Manager and Head of Operations, provided an update on the Seymour Wellfield generator replacement project, which involves the demolition and replacement of the existing diesel generator. The Committee discussed project delays, bidding, schedule, funding, and other miscellaneous improvements.

Update on *The Land We Need for the Water We Use Program* – Mr. Triana reported:

Reservoir Levels (Percent Full)

	Current Year	Previous Year	Historical Average	Drought Status
July 31	90%	95%	81%	None

Rainfall (inches)

	Current Year	Previous Year	Historical Average
July 2024	5.24	7.08	3.75
Fiscal YTD (6/1/24 –	9.18	9.56	7.46

Land We Need for the Water We Use Program (Dispositions/Acquisitions)

- East Haven – Corresponded with property owner of 22+/- acres.
- Hamden, Preisner property – Marked boundaries.
- Cheshire, Bis/Bowman property – Inspected newly proposed property lines and removal of the farm dump materials. Notified by DEEP that we will receive a OSWLA grant for the property. Attended Governor's press conference announcing the awards.
- North Branford, Beech St. and Pomps La. properties (NB 4) – NBLCT updated their survey after DEEP surveyor's comments.

- Seymour, Silver Mine Rd. (SE 9) – Emailed town staff that we were not interested in selling any of the Class III acres.

Rental houses:

- Woodbridge, 2040 Litchfield Tpk. – Met with owner and representative of Preservation Connecticut to discuss chimney in kitchen.
- Woodbridge, 115 Sperry Rd. – Responded to question from owner about history of the well.

Forestry Update

- Killingworth - East Hammonasset Leaf Screen Thinning, (KI 4) – 75% complete.
- Hamden - Overstory removal and Tornado Salvage, (HA 36) – The harvest was halted in early June, and the logger pulled his equipment off the property on June 13th. It is uncertain at this point whether the buyer will continue with the salvage operation even if a market is found - 15% complete.
- Guilford - Menunketuc High-Grade Rehabilitation Cut and Conifer Release (GU12/12A) – 20% complete.

    - Trained Natural Resource Specialists in various field skills, including tree measurements, small equipment usage, tree care, and steam weeder deployment including safety practices associated with these activities.
    - Met with witch hazel harvester.
    - Worked with two maple tapers to explore transferring sugarbush from one to the other.
    - Met with the Connecticut Land Conservation Council's Climate Smart Stewardship Coordinator to plan a forest adaptation workshop.
    - Met volunteers from the Native Plant Trust checking on population of cattail sedge and identifying new populations nearby.

Recreation

- Discussed access to Lake Chamberlain with Bethany Horsemen.
- Issued key to Bethany Horsemen for trail maintenance.
- Received DPH recreation activity permit renewals for Hammonasset, Saltonstall, Big Gulph, Sugarloaf, Genesee, and Pine Hill.
- Hosted six events for kids at Maltby Lakes: New Haven Police Activity League (3), Milford Boys & Girls Club (2), and Hamden Hall. Approximately 180 children attended events during July. Some fish caught at the events were donated to a bird habilitation facility.
- Recycled lead sinkers and plastic lures.
- The Water Wagon attended six events in July.

	July		June	
	2024	2023	2024	2023
Permit Holders	4,929	4,879	4,989	4,980

Special Activity Permits

- New Haven Bird Club (Patrick Leahy) – Fall Migrant and Foliage Walk to observe species that are nesting on Lake Chamberlain along the Sargent River, (10/15/24).
- New Haven Bird Club (Patrick Leahy) – Fall Migrant and Foliage Walk to observe fall birds and beautiful tree colors, Lake Dawson, (11/2/24).

- New Haven Bird Club (Patrick Leahy) – spring bird walk to observe species nesting on Lake Chamberlain, special emphasis on Bluebird/Tree swallow trail of bird houses, Lake Chamberlain, (5/21/25).
- New Haven Bird Club (Patrick Leahy) – spring bird walk to observe species nesting on Lake Watrous, special emphasis on Bluebird/Tree swallow trail of bird houses, Lake Watrous, (5/28/25).
- Western CT Orienteering Club – (Ms. Susan DeWitt and designees) – cross country race on foot, property near Ansonia Nature Center, 2000' to the north of Nature Center with frontage on Rimmon Rd. (Rt. 313) in Seymour, 10/27/24.
- U. S. Geological Survey (Sydney Welch, Physical Scientist) - Take water level measurement of a monitoring well located on SCCRWA property-Middletown Avenue, North Branford (One short visit between (7/17/24-8/31/24)
- CT Forest & Park Assoc. (CFPA) (Elizabeth Merow) conduct tour of property, Master Woodland Manager Program, forestry ecology, Rt. 79 Madison-Nathan's Pond, (9/21/24)

Other items

- Encroachments/agreements –
    - Agricultural agreements – Spoke to potential farmer for fields on the west side. Renewed hay agreement for field with Wettemann (NB 5A).
    - Hamden, 14 Russell St. (HA 6B) – Signed agreement for fence along the property line.
    - Orange, 854 Greenway Rd. (OR 4) – Signed license agreement for lawn and cart path.
    - Hamden, 245 Ives St. (HA 39) – Signed license agreement for lawn.
    - West Haven, Hood Terrace (WH 8) – Verified that dumpsters have been removed from our property.
    - Hamden, 95 Booth Ter. (HA 22 & HA 22A) – Met with abutter to review the new pins that were set.
    - West Haven, Shingle Hill Tanks (WH 7) – Engineering staff stated Yale's structural analysis was satisfactory. Reviewed red-lined version of the agreement and sent final comments to Murtha.

- Invasive plants – Treated or documented invasive plant populations in North Branford, Branford, and East Haven. Water chestnut harvest for 2024 was completed. Flew drone missions at Furnace Pond to document the pre- and post-harvest conditions. Showed water chestnut harvest to UConn staff. Used new steam weeder in the Christmas tree plantation other sites at Lake Gaillard.

Invasive Species Documented/ Mapped (ac)	22 acres
Invasive Species Treated (ac/MH)	0.5 acres

- Deer hunt – Proficiency tests were conducted at Lake Gaillard. Nineteen hunters passed the test.
- West Haven, Allings Crossing Rd. (WH 6) – Continued corresponding with UI/Avangrid staff about a license agreement at the property. Engineering cleared us to sign the agreement.
- Orange, Baldwin Rd. utility pole – UI/Avangrid staff said they would forward a license agreement to use for the guy wire and anchor.

- Hamden, Lake Whitney access – Signed license agreement for access through UI/Avangrid property to the dam.
- Drone inspections – Flew drone missions documenting work at the Prospect Reservoir dam. Hosted a meeting to discuss drone models and uses with multiple parties in the natural resources industry.
- Water main easement encroachments – Met with others to discuss our approach to finding and dealing with encroachments over water main easements.

There were no other land items to report.

The next regular meeting is on Wednesday, September 11, 2024, at 4:30 p.m. at Furnace Pond in Branford.

At 6:32 p.m., on motion made by Mr. Malloy and seconded by Mr. Eitzer, the Committee voted to adjourn the meeting.

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Mark Levine, Chair

September 11, 2024
Land Use Committee Meeting

Reservoir Levels (Percent Full)

	Current Year	Previous Year	Historical Average	Drought Status
August 31	87%	91%	74%	None

Rainfall (inches)

	Current Year	Previous Year	Historical Average
August 2024	6.31	4.90	3.98
Fiscal YTD (6/1/24 – 8/31/24)	15.49	14.46	11.44

Land We Need for the Water We Use Program (Dispositions/Acquisitions)

- Hamden – Corresponded with property owner of 4+/- acres.
- Cheshire, Bis/Bowman property – Received award packet for the OSWLA grant. Closed on the property by the end of the month.
- North Branford, Beech St. and Pomps La. properties (NB 4) – Notified by NBLCT that they were ready to execute the P&SA.

Rental houses:

- Hamden, 233 Skiff St. – Discussed the resubdivision for the lot to go with the house with Juliano.
- Woodbridge, 1029 Johnson Rd. – Met with owners and potential buyer at the house. Discussed the deed restrictions.

Forestry Update

- Killingworth - East Hammonasset Leaf Screen Thinning, (KI 4) – 75% complete.
- Hamden - Overstory removal and Tornado Salvage, (HA 36) – The harvest was halted in early June, and the logger pulled his equipment off the property on June 13th. It is uncertain at this point whether the buyer will continue with the salvage operation even if a market is found - 15% complete.
- Guilford - Menunketuc High-Grade Rehabilitation Cut and Conifer Release (GU12/12A) – 20% complete.

  - Joined DEEP wildlife division staff at Lake Gaillard for a night of mist netting bat at the hibernaculum.
  - Worked to plan and implement the first field season of the Landscape Scale Restoration grant.
  - Gave a tour and demonstrated steam weeder unit to USFS LSR grant administrator.
  - Finalized details of a forest products sales agreement for witch hazel stems. The witch hazel will be sustainably harvested from Genesee and Nathan's Pond tracts within the bounds of three timber sale harvests.
  - Completed and mailed USDA's survey request regarding RWA's Conservation Practices Adoption history and motivations.
  - Worked with volunteers from the Native Plant Trust to report on a recently re-located population of swamp cottonwood.

Recreation

- Held botany walk at Harry Field Rd., Madison with 30 participants.
- Issued latest newsletter.
- Ordered walleye for stocking Lake Saltonstall this fall.
- Two permit holders had their permits revoked for using live bait at Lake Saltonstall.

- Cleared trails at Woodbridge Greenway, Big Gulph, Sugarloaf, Genesee, Lake Chamberlain, Lake Saltonstall, and Lake Bethany.
- Responded to request for trail off of Dogburn Rd. in Orange and Johnson Rd. in Woodbridge.
- The Water Wagon attended five events in August.

	August		July	
	2024	2023	2024	2023
Permit Holders	4,880	4,883	4,929	4,879

Special Activity Permits

- (nothing in August)

Other items

- Encroachments/agreements –
    - Hamden, 14 Russell St. (HA 6B) – Fence was installed and checked.
    - Hamden, Lake Whitney dam access (HA 4) – Signed license agreement with United Illuminating to clarify our access to the dam area.
    - Hamden, Hamden Hall athletic fields (HA 9A) – Exchanged appraisals with the school to set the annual fee for the remainder of the lease.
    - North Haven, Wharton Brook Industrial Park water main – Signed license agreement that extends until 2049 for water main that runs under train tracks.
    - West Haven, Allings Crossing Rd. (WH 6) – Executed license agreement with United Illuminating for access across our property to remove old electric poles along the railroad tracks.
    - West Haven, Shingle Hill Tanks (WH 7) – Completed the license agreement and approved the exhibits to be attached.

- Invasive plants – Treated or documented invasive plant populations in North Branford, Bethany, Woodbridge, and Branford. Steamweeded roadside vegetation at Lake Gaillard. Flew drone mission at Furnace pond to complete the post-harvest drone map from July.

Invasive Species Documented/ Mapped (ac)	9 acres
Invasive Species Treated (ac/MH)	1.7 acres

- Deer hunt – Check station volunteers were chosen and contacted. Prospect and Ansonia areas were reflagged. Special permittees were notified about the hunt via US mail.
- New Haven, Sachem St. watermain – Contacted Yale staff about getting a former easement from them for the portion of the road that the city discontinued.
- Northford water main – Fielded call from Northford business owner about extending a water main up our Diversion Rd. to Reeds Gap Rd. Forwarded the request to others at RWA.
- Hamden, Clark's Pond parking – Responded to town that they can put up "no parking" signs.
- Woodbridge, Rt. 69 ROW – Replied to fiber optic consultant about vegetation management along Rt. 69 under the utility poles that run parallel to the road.
- Water main easement encroachments – Discussed approach to documenting and dealing with encroachments over water main easements with GIS staff.
- North Branford, West Pond Tank (NB 10) – Answered questions from Engineering staff about our property and our ROW to the tank for a planned second tank at the site.
- Milford, Ford St. tanks (MI 12) – Answered questions from Distribution staff about our property for a planned booster chlorination station at the site.

- Pollinator garden – Real Estate staff worked on the pollinator garden at 90 Sargent Dr., New Haven. Also worked on new planting area at Furnace Pond.
- Drone missions – Conducted flight in Prospect to document construction at the Prospect Reservoir.

Attachments

- August 7, 2024 - Gone with the wind: Beech leaf disease spreads in New England, but these CT scientists could halt it – CT Public Radio
- August 4, 2024 - CT experts detect West Nile virus in mosquitoes within 21 towns and cities across the state – CT Insider
- August 14, 2024 - Regional Water Authority to buy, protect open space off Mountain Road in Cheshire – NH Register
- August 14, 2024 - Who's to blame for PFAS in our drinking water? Here's what hundreds of cities say – USA Today
- August 20, 2024 - Missing Person Rescued From Regional Water Authority Trails In Madison – Patch
- September 4, 2024 - A CT scientist is a one-woman army in the battle against the invasive hemlock woolly adelgid – CT Public Radio

Upcoming Agenda Items

October 2024 - Lake Saltonstall

Gone with the wind: Beech leaf disease spreads in New England, but these CT scientists could halt it

Connecticut Public Radio | By Jennifer Ahrens - August 7, 2024

In a small forest in Windsor, Connecticut, scientist Richard Cowles is among a team of Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station employees spending his days studying a microscopic roundworm causing beech leaf disease.

The organism, a foliar nematode called litylenchus crenatae mccannii, feeds on the tree's leaves and buds, causing premature leaf drop and weakening the tree so it is more susceptible to other pests and environmental stressors. In recent years, scientists said the invasive species dampened New England's golden fall foliage because it caused unprecedented leaf drop.

Now, Cowles is trying to determine how such a tiny organism, which was first detected in Ohio in 2012, was able to rapidly spread to all of New England in less than 15 years.

"It's unknown how the disease spreads and there is no cure," officials told The Associated Press when the invasive worm was detected in Vermont for the first time last year. But Cowles's research team might change that. Tracing the worms from tiny water droplets, to beech leaves

Cowles said his research revealed the invasive organism "can be blown in little aerosolized droplets during a heavy rain event when it's very windy." The distribution map for Beech leaf disease also suggests wind was playing a key role, according to Cowles.

"You can see the progress over time," he said. " "You'll notice that there's a very strong pattern moving eastward quickly and then up the coast quickly, which are also the prevailing directions for the wind." It's not just wind that's likely helping the organism spread, he said. "This year, we have some evidence that they are also carried on the feet of birds during these rain events," Cowles said.

He said they have also learned that the migration of the tiny worm between trees can begin as early as mid-July, several weeks earlier than previously thought, and it lasts well into the fall.

"We're talking about dozens of nematodes in every cell between the veins of the leaf," Cowles said. "So there are literally millions or billions of nematodes that might be emerging from the leaves."

Shriveled leaves, reduced resilience An infected beech will develop dark bands on its leaves or the leaves will become crinkled, small and leathery. It's believed this invasive pest likely came from Asia, according to Cowles. "Scientists have looked at the genetic sequence for the nematode here in North America and the one in Japan," Cowles said. "They're nearly identical."

Connecticut's beech trees have been in a steep decline and their growth has completely stagnated since the roundworm reached the state five years ago, according to state scientists.

"They may be barely managing to fulfill their metabolic demands," CAES assistant agricultural scientist Elisabeth Ward said. Emaciated trees would mean bad news for wildlife, Ward said, since they rely on the beech tree nuts as a food source. Scientists say its full environmental impact has not yet been felt in New England.

"Bear in mind that we have had only a few years to document this disease," state forest pathologist Robert Marra said. "Which is merely a blink in time when it comes to trees."

Testing solutions to save beech trees

The research at CAES isn't just focused on how the foliar nematode migrates from state to state, but also on how it can be combated. Cowles said that while potassium phosphite is a good treatment to protect beech leaves from the roundworm, it's not economically possible to treat every beech in the state. So he's testing two common compounds which can produce similar protective properties in plants.

"Some of these are aspirin and methyl salicylate, which is wintergreen flavoring," he said. "I'm applying these different products to beech saplings to see if we'll get a reduction in the number of leaves that show symptoms of infection by beach leaf disease."

Another CAES ongoing study involves testing European varieties of beech to hopefully find a variety that can withstand the roundworm's negative impact. "There appears to be considerable genetic variation among European beech with respect to susceptibility to beech leaf disease," Cowles said. The European trees might also be a good alternative to one day replace the nut production lost by the American beech. Cowles notes that New England wildlife, like squirrels and birds, "go crazy over the nuts from European Beech, just as they do on American Beech."

CT experts detect West Nile virus in mosquitoes within 21 towns and cities across the state

CT Insider | By Abby Weiss | Aug. 4, 2024

Experts have detected West Nile virus in mosquitoes across 21 Connecticut municipalities this year. Scientists at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES), which traps and tests mosquitoes for viruses, have recorded 87 West Nile-infected mosquitoes in Connecticut as of Friday, according to their latest report.

The highest number of infections has been recorded at the Beaver Pond Park trap site in New Haven, with 11 mosquitoes testing positive for the virus since June 17. Ten mosquitoes have tested positive for the virus in Sleepy Hollow Park in Stamford since July 1. The number of mosquitoes that CAES collects varies per trap site.

CAES has also detected West Nile-infected mosquitoes in Bridgeport, Canterbury, Danbury, Darien, Glastonbury, Greenwich, Groton, Hartford, Milford, New Canaan, Norwalk, South Windsor, Southington, Stonington, Stratford, Voluntown, West Haven, Westport and Wethersfield.

Eastern equine encephalitis virus, another disease found in mosquitoes, has also been identified in mosquitoes in Canterbury and Voluntown, according to CAES. The department has detected 14 cases as of Friday.

CAES traps mosquitoes as part of the State of Connecticut Mosquito Management Program, which is monitoring mosquitoes for the presence of viruses that can cause illness in people, including West Nile virus, Eastern equine encephalitis virus and ZIKA. Test results are available about one week after mosquito collection and positive results are reported to local health departments by the Connecticut Department of Public Health.

The first positive West Nile virus mosquitoes cases were reported by the state on June 26. The mosquitoes were trapped in New Haven on June 17.

The state has not reported a human case in Connecticut this year.

West Nile virus is spread to humans by the bite of infected mosquitoes, specifically the Culex species typically found in residential areas. If bitten, the chances of a person developing illness are less than 1-in-100, according to state's Mosquito Management Program. Most people infected with West Nile virus have mild or no symptoms and they develop the illness three to 14 days after being bitten. There's no specific treatment for the virus and most people recover from it, the website states, but symptoms could last for months for people with encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain.

Local government officials have warned Connecticut residents to take precautions against mosquito bites and many have implemented control measures to prevent the spread of mosquito-borne illnesses within their municipalities. Individual precautions include wearing tightly woven clothing around dusk and dawn when mosquitos are most active and using mosquito netting when sleeping outdoors, the state's Mosquito Management Program website reads.

John Shepard, a medical entomologist at CAES, said in a release in July that he is seeing an expansion of West Nile virus activity to new towns in Connecticut.

“We anticipate further build-up of West Nile virus in mosquitoes with increased risk of human infection from now through September,” he said in the statement.

Since 2000, there have been 181 human cases of West Nile virus identified among Connecticut residents, including four fatalities. Last season, five human cases were recorded in Connecticut.

Regional Water Authority to buy, protect open space off Mountain Road in Cheshire

New Haven Register - Austin Mirmina | Aug. 14, 2024

CHESHIRE — The South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority has agreed to buy about 70 acres of land on Mountain Road and preserve it as open space, completing the town's green belt corridor along the Prospect Ridge. Read Article

The property at 659 Mountain Road had been the missing link in the chain of open space the runs along the ridge near the Prospect-Cheshire line. With the purchase, which was completed using a $188,500 state grant, the Mountain Road property will be added to the nearly 900 acres of undeveloped land that has already been protected in perpetuity.

The move ensures that the property will not be lost to development and allows visitors to continue using it for hiking and other passive recreation, officials said. It also preserves the Prospect Ridge's natural resources and scenic views — both for people looking out from the hill top and those admiring it from other vantage points, including the town's center.

"By doing this, all of this land will never be developed," Andrew Martelli, Cheshire's economic development director, said. "If the (property) was subdivided, it would have forever changed the ridgeline views."

Phil Bowman, a local developer and the principal of Blue Trails, LLC, which currently owns 659 Mountain Road, said selling the land to the RWA was the "logical thing to do" because it abuts open space owned by Cheshire to the north and south and by the Water Authority to the west.

"I think it's a good strategic purchase for the water company and the town and its adding to open space for residents, which I think is a good thing," said Bowman, who is also the founder of Pinnacle Land Development, another Cheshire-based business.

A large chunk of the property being sold is part of the Mill River watershed, which connects to the Connecticut River, making it an ideal parcel for protection, according to John Triana, the RWA's real estate manager.

"It makes it a larger block of forested land to protect the public water supply and have all the other advantages that open space provides, from wetlands, wildlife, clean air and everything in between," Triana said last week.

Officials declined to reveal the sale price for the property, and Triana said the RWA had not yet closed on it. The land's market value is $771,200, according to property records.

The 70 acres at 659 Mountain Road had been part of a larger parcel that comprised the estate of the late Helen Bis, a lifelong Cheshire resident who, according to her obituary, worked at the former Ball and Socket facility on West Main Street until her retirement. After buying the Bis property, Bowman received town approval to subdivide the land and build homes on four separate lots along Mountain Road. Much of the excess acreage that he is now selling to the RWA is not suitable for development, he said.

For decades, Cheshire has worked to establish greenbelts along its western and eastern boundaries, and preserving the former Bis property was the last piece of the puzzle for the Prospect Ridge corridor. The town has been aided in its quest by several groups that have acquired and protected properties in those areas, including the state, RWA, Cheshire Land Trust and others.

The ridge is traversed by many trails, most notably the Regicides Trail and Quinnipiac Trail, according to Gov. Ned Lamont's office. Feeder trails also run from town roads and properties into the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System.

The $188,500 grant was part of $14.5 million in state funding recently awarded to help buy and protect more than 2,626 acres of open space in 18 municipalities across Connecticut, Lamont's office said. The funds, provided through two state Department of Environmental Protection grant programs, marked the largest round of open space protection awards — both by acreage protected and money awarded — in more than a decade, according to the governor's office.

“Connecticut is the fourth most densely populated state in the country, and it is critical that we set aside some of the gorgeous natural resources we have in the state and protect it as open space in perpetuity for everyone to enjoy for generations,” Lamont said in a statement. The grants, he added, "will not only help combat the impacts of climate change, but they will also create more equitable access to outdoor green spaces within our most underserved communities."

Cheshire has about 4,700 acres preserved as open space, according to its website. At more than 1,500 acres, the town is the largest open space land owner in Cheshire.

Who's to blame for PFAS in our drinking water? Here's what hundreds of cities say

Austin Fast Cecilia Garzella – 8/14/24 - USA TODAY

A USA TODAY analysis of new EPA data shows local officials most frequently blame airports; utilities, such as sewage treatment plants; and military bases as likely sources of toxic "forever chemicals" in their drinking water.

Thousands of public drinking water systems began sampling last year for PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, in the Environmental Protection Agency's largest-ever effort to monitor their spread across the country.

As water utilities submit their results, the EPA also asks if they're aware of any sources that may have polluted their drinking water.

Most systems marked "No" or "Don't know" in the records the EPA released this month, but about 730 checked off boxes next to a list of two dozen potential sources.

The military is the most common culprit named among the 168 water systems that pointed to a PFAS source and also reported contamination above limits the EPA set earlier this year, USA TODAY's analysis found. Philadelphia, Cincinnati and Sacramento are among 53 such systems indicating military bases.

Water department officials in Cincinnati and another Ohio city, Dayton, point to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base as contributing to their PFAS problems. Dayton has even sued the federal government to recoup costs for treating its water, and that's just one of thousands of cases now pending against PFAS manufacturers and polluters.

"Our ratepayers are paying $100 million (to remove PFAS), and Wright-Patterson is still allowed to put this stuff out," said Jeff Swertfeger, Cincinnati's water quality and treatment superintendent.

"Why are we putting this on the backs of ratepayers of water systems to do this? How come the individual polluters, if you will, why are they being allowed to put this stuff out even though it's regulated in drinking water?" Swertfeger asked.

"We really wish that when the EPA first started regulating PFAS, they would have tried to get it out of the environment first rather than basically putting it on our hands to get rid of it."

How widespread are PFAS in drinking water?

More than 1,000 drinking water systems have detected PFAS above limits the EPA set in April, according to USA TODAY's analysis.

Almost 400 of these water systems – or about 11% of those with a full set of measurements – exceeded a PFAS limit multiple times, meaning they may need to take action to remove PFAS from the water they pump into customers' homes.

PFAS are a family of nearly indestructible chemicals that build up in the environment and in human bodies, contributing to increased risk for certain cancers and other serious health problems.

MAP: Where water systems reported PFAS contamination

This map shows water systems included in the EPA's PFAS testing records, as of July 11, 2024. It's based on boundaries developed by SimpleLab, a water-testing company. Points represent systems where the exact boundaries are not available. Enter an address to locate the nearest water systems. Then click on a system to review its PFAS measurements. Don't see a map? Click here.

Since January 2023, thousands of drinking water systems have been testing for almost 30 types of the chemicals. The data released last week includes less than half the measurements the agency expects to collect through 2026, meaning the number of affected systems will only continue to grow.

In total, the EPA has estimated about 6,000 systems serving up to 100 million Americans eventually would need to do something – such as installing expensive filtration systems or removing wells from service – to keep in line with the new limits.

Where are the chemicals coming from?

Military bases topped the list of potential sources among drinking water systems that detected PFAS above the EPA's new limits, but USA TODAY found airports closely followed with 50 systems. These include Fresno, California; Newport News, Virginia; and Greensboro, North Carolina.

When USA TODAY asked water utilities for proof backing up the potential sources they marked, some provided scientific studies and technical reports as evidence.

Newport News Waterworks, for example, pointed to a 2021 report that described the Richmond International Airport directly upstream, "including the Air National Guard facility/Superfund site," as the primary source of its PFAS contamination.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, city leaders commissioned an investigative report that identified the industrial area around Piedmont Triad International Airport as the likely source of PFAS contamination, primarily from the use of firefighting foams, said Michael Borchers, director of Greensboro's water resources department.

Others don't have concrete evidence, but they reported possible sources "to the best of their ability and knowledge," according to EPA spokesperson Angela Hackel.

Defense Department spokesman Robert Ditchey said he could not comment on the EPA's data sources or analysis. But he did criticize the EPA's wording, which asks systems about "potential current and/or historical sources of PFAS that may have impacted" their water.

The question, Ditchey wrote via email, "is slightly ambiguous and the responses to that specific question are open to interpretation."

Military and civilian airfields have used PFAS-laden foams for decades to douse gasoline fires. The Defense Department has been transitioning about 1,500 facilities to fluorine-free alternatives and was supposed to stop using firefighting foams containing PFAS altogether by Oct. 1.

Earlier this month, however, the Defense Department submitted a waiver to delay that deadline to October 2025, with the possibility for another one-year extension after that.

Documents show the Pentagon has been investigating PFAS contamination at more than 700 active and former military bases around the world.

At Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, groundwater test results from June included samples as high as 7,400 parts per trillion (ppt) for PFOS and 450 ppt for PFOA, two of the most common forever chemicals. The EPA has capped their presence in drinking water at 4 ppt.

One of Dayton's water treatment plants directly downstream from the base detected PFOS above the limit every quarter last year, ranging from 6.2 to 10 ppt, according to EPA records.

"The city of Dayton has sued the Air Force over the PFAS contamination flowing from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Because the matter is in litigation we cannot comment further," said Michael Powell, director of the city's water department.

Some Air Force operations are within a mile of Dayton's public wells, according to the pending lawsuit's initial complaint, filed in May 2021. In the complaint, the city accuses the base of taking "no action to stop or even mitigate the ongoing migration of its PFAS contamination into the city's wellfield and water supply," even as "representatives for (the base) have known that the city relies on its sole-source aquifer for drinking water."

The lawsuit says more than 2.5 million people in southwest Ohio rely on that aquifer for clean drinking water. Forever chemicals from the base appear to flow downstream to Cincinnati, where a treatment plant on the same river system detected PFOS above the limit twice last year, according to the EPA data.

"We know there are a couple of sources that are actively putting out PFAS that we suspect is getting into our aquifer," said Swertfeger, the water quality superintendent in Cincinnati. Alongside Wright-Patterson, he named Rumpke Waste & Recycling, a waste management company that operates a local landfill.

"Runoff from some of their properties has high levels of PFAS on it," Swertfeger said. "We believe that is impacting our wells as well."

Rumpke spokesperson Amanda Pratt told USA TODAY the testing was "not close enough to Rumpke Sanitary Landfill to make a definitive assertion that our facility is contributing to higher levels in the waterway." She pointed out that modern landfills like theirs have protective liners both below and above the garbage to direct any water into treatment systems.

Whatever the source may be, there's no disputing that Cincinnati is spending more than $100 million to install an advanced granular activated carbon treatment system to remove PFAS that polluters have released into the environment.

"We didn't create this. Nothing we do is producing this," Swertfeger said, adding that the new EPA regulations have essentially made it their job to clean it up. "I think there's a little bit of frustration on our part because the polluters aren't necessarily being held responsible."

Dayton is not the only place trying to force polluters to cover costs for cleaning up the PFAS it has released into the environment. Last month, the state of New Mexico broadened its lawsuit against the Defense Department to recoup "all past and future clean-up costs" at three Air Force bases, a missile range and an Army base.

"Cannon Air Force Base and other DoD (Department of Defense) facilities have injured the most valuable natural resource on Earth – our water," wrote New Mexico Office of Natural Resources Trustee Maggie Hart Stebbins in a news release. "Our residents suffer when they can't use that groundwater, and it's time for the federal government to compensate communities that are bearing the burden of its pollution."

The federal court system sometimes lumps lawsuits involving environmental disputes and large numbers of people together in a process similar to class-action lawsuits. Courts around the country have transferred almost 10,000 cases seeking compensation for PFAS contamination from firefighting foams – including those in Dayton and New Mexico – into a single action in federal court in South Carolina.

In February, the federal government filed motions to dismiss over two dozen of these cases, claiming immunity from such lawsuits because using firefighting foam was not a mandate but left to the discretion of base leaders. Some bases are working through the EPA's Superfund cleanup process, and the government argued it shouldn't also be targeted by lawsuits.

Ditchey, the Defense Department spokesman, declined to comment on the pending litigation.

But he said the military is committed to transparency with communities dealing with PFAS pollution.

"DoD continues to prioritize actions to address cleanup at locations that have the highest, most critical risk to human health, and will continue to accelerate cleanup efforts nationwide," Ditchey wrote.

He explained that the Air Force, Army and Navy regularly test drinking water for certain forever chemicals, both on base and off base, and publish some sample results online. They also provide bottled water, filtration systems and connections to municipal systems where PFOS and PFOA measure over 70 ppt. The new EPA limits, set in April, are 4 ppt.

"DoD's actions are consistent with the EPA's recommendations," Ditchey wrote. "The department's priority is to quickly reduce significantly elevated levels of PFOS and PFOA in drinking water where DoD is the known source."

Water utilities shun blame for PFAS, but some fear naming polluters

Water utility officials USA TODAY has interviewed over the past year have been quick to echo Swertfeger's sentiment that they're stuck paying to clean up polluters' messes.

But when asked directly about their responses to the EPA questionnaire on PFAS sources, many demurred.

For example, Sacramento's water utility indicated military bases and waste management facilities as possible sources. Defense Department records show ongoing PFAS investigations at a half-dozen Air Force and Army sites around the city.

"The city's response to an EPA reporting requirement does not indicate a claim nor accusation," wrote Mark Severeid, Sacramento's water quality superintendent. "Military bases and waste management facilities are known sources of PFAS. As there are several in the immediate region, these two potential contaminant sources were marked on the checklist."

The Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department marked airports as a possible source in May's EPA data. When USA TODAY asked for further details, the utility's spokesperson Jennifer Messemer-Skold said it was a mistake.

"Laboratory staff inadvertently selected 'airport operations' for the contributing cause of the PFAS found in the water," Messemer-Skold wrote. "The staff member has since corrected the report by selecting 'other' as the potential source."

Last week's new EPA data show Miami-Dade County has updated its response to "Don't know" for the question of whether officials were aware of any possible PFAS sources. But the cities of Hialeah and Miami Beach, which both purchase their drinking water from Miami-Dade's utility, still indicate airports as a possible source of their PFAS contamination.

Upgrading Miami-Dade's water treatment to remove PFAS could cost up to $4 billion, Messemer-Skold added, but she said they're "not able to speculate on facilities or industries and their potential PFAS impact."

Two of Veolia Water Delaware's plants in Wilmington tested above the new limits for PFOA on four separate occasions last year, the EPA data show, and they've detected a handful of unregulated PFAS chemicals. The utility marked "military base" as a possible source of this contamination.

"We respectfully decline to comment on those auxiliary data fields," said Adam Lisberg, senior vice president of communications in Veolia's municipal water division.

In larger cities with many possible sources for PFAS, it can be tough to pinpoint exactly who's to blame, said Jared Hayes, a senior policy analyst at the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit environmental watchdog. But he added some people will hesitate to point fingers at a military base serving as an economic and social hub for the community.

"Many people who live and work in these communities are veterans. They don't necessarily want to paint the DoD as the bad guy," Hayes said. "It's like, 'Well, I don't want to hold the base commanders responsible for these things because they didn't know.' But the DoD knew. The Pentagon knew. That's the issue."

Hayes points to a raft of military-commissioned reports as far back as 1973, when a small study showed rainbow trout exposed to firefighting foams all died within four days. In 1991, an Army Corps of Engineers report described the foam as a "hazardous material" that needed to be swapped out with safer alternatives.

USA TODAY also asked the Defense Department to respond to Hayes' claim, but its spokesman did not provide a response by press time.

What's the EPA's next step?

This self-reported data about how PFAS are winding up in America's drinking water will help the EPA "further understand potential correlations between known source contamination and treated drinking water quality," according to EPA spokesperson Dominique Joseph.

She said this data helped EPA officials weigh the costs and benefits of limiting PFAS in drinking water before the agency approved those limits in April. It also helps them create resources, such as an online mapping tool presenting potential sources, that can "inform decisions that may be taken in communities to address PFAS contamination at the source."

Last December, the EPA's annual report on PFAS progress described holding polluters accountable and turning off the tap for industrial polluters as key priorities.

"Restricting point-source discharges from industrial facilities that use PFAS is a significant opportunity to safely remove PFAS pollution before it enters the environment or wastewater streams," the report reads.

This localized source data from water utilities could help fill in gaps in achieving those goals, according to Hayes from the Environmental Working Group.

"Hopefully they can really help set those standards and take some of the burden off utilities," Hayes said. "Let's put that cost burden on the polluters, and make the polluters pay to clean up the mess."

Missing Person Rescued From Regional Water Authority Trails In Madison

Alfred Branch, Patch Staff - Aug 20, 2024

MADISON, CT — A missing person, who authorities said had suffered minor injuries, was rescued Monday night by members of the North Madison Volunteer Fire Company, Madison police and other emergency personnel.

The person had been reported missing in the Regional Water Authority recreation trails along Route 79 in Madison at about 7:30 p.m.

Using an ATV and other motorized equipment, firefighters and police began searching for the person.

"Due to the complexity of the search, additional resources were requested from Madison Hose Company, Madison EMS, Killingworth Vol. Fire Company, CT State Police as well as Branford Fire Department, who [provided] a drone to assist with the search," fire officials wrote on Facebook.

The injured missing person was found at about 10:30 p.m.

"We would like to thank our mutual partners as well as our other Madison Public Safety Agencies for their assistance in a successful search that ended with a positive outcome," officials said.

A CT scientist is a one-woman army in the battle against the invasive hemlock woolly adelgid

Connecticut Public Radio | By Jennifer Ahrens - September 4, 2024

It was nearly 30 years ago that Carole Cheah, research entomologist with the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, released her first batch of tiny lady beetles from Japan to combat an invasive pest that was predicted to devastate Connecticut forests.

That beetle, called Sasajiscymnus tsugae, is only about 2 millimeters long, but it's been having a big impact on the invasive hemlock woolly adelgid, its exclusive food source.

Also known as HWA, hemlock wooly adelgids first appeared in America in Virginia in the 1950s. The insect reached Connecticut in 1985 and can now be found in 20 eastern states and southern Canada.

HWA feeds on hemlocks' storage cells and inhibits the tree's ability to produce new growth, weakening it and making it more susceptible to other environmental stressors.

At first, the damage to forests was alarming, Cheah said.

"All through the '90s into the early 2000s, we were losing trees by the thousands," Cheah said.

Then, scientists got an idea.

What if a natural predator of the pest could be brought to America and safely released into the wild to help combat the spread of HWA?

A now-retired CAES scientist, Mark McClure, went to Japan to find that natural predator, Sasajiscymnus tsugae, and brought it back to Connecticut.

Cheah said she and a team of state researchers figured out how to breed and rear the beetles for release.

From 1995 to 2007, more than 176,000 beetles were reared at a state lab in Windsor and released in Connecticut.

"It's really a homegrown project," she said.

But then, Cheah said, federal funding for the beetle project dried up. Now, "I'm just by myself," she said.

So she's turned to other sources for help, "partnering with various foresters and natural resource conservation managers" to continue releasing the beetles, she said.

Today, Cheah sources the beetles from private companies, which costs about $3 per beetle.

The money to buy them comes from a variety of sources. Her latest partners are The Farmington River Coordinating Committee and The Lower Farmington Salmon Brook Wild and Scenic Committee.

"We actually just got these grants [that] has allowed us to get thousands of beetles," she said.

Nearly 30 years after that first batch of beetles was released in Connecticut, Cheah said she believes the insects are helping to protect trees.

"Based on what I've been seeing, the recovery in the forest, recovery of the trees, and the drop in the Adelgid populations, it's been very encouraging," Cheah said.