



**Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago**

# President's Annual Message 2025: A Year in Review



Reflecting on the past 12 months, I am proud to witness how our collective efforts have made lasting positive impacts and secured meaningful progress across wastewater treatment, stormwater management, waterway stewardship, monitoring and research, infrastructure management, fiscal strength and community engagement. We met our mission in protecting the health and safety of the 5.19 million people we serve, protecting the quality of their water while building regional resilience against a changing climate.

This year the MWRD was showered with praise in receiving the prestigious "Leading Utility of the World" award at the Water Environment Federation's Technical Exhibition and Conference (WEFTEC). The honor underscores our status among the world's most forward-thinking water and wastewater utilities. We joined a global network of utilities held up as the "gold standard of utility innovation and performance." This achievement reflects our steadily advancing capabilities, deep commitment to stewardship and readiness to lead into the future. In our presentation to the Leading Utilities of the World at WEFTEC, we highlighted our triumphs in meeting the challenges of climate change, community engagement and nutrient control. But these are only a few of the many challenges we face each day, and I am proud to report that our staff continues to rise to the occasion, working tirelessly to protect public health and preserve our water environment.

In the pages that follow, you will find highlights of our progress under the MWRD's 2021–2025 Strategic Plan, including achievements in protecting water quality, advancing research, pursuing energy neutrality, enhancing climate resilience, expanding green infrastructure, and strengthening community partnerships. These efforts reflect our commitment to sound financial stewardship and our mission to serve the people of Cook County.

Thank you to the Board of Commissioners, our talented workforce, our municipal partners, our vendors and contractors, community organizations and residents for helping make 2025 a year of significant advancement. We carry this momentum forward with purpose and optimism.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kari K. Steele". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Kari K. Steele  
*President of the Board of Commissioners*

## **2021- 2025 Strategic Plan**

In 2025, we entered the final year of our current five-year Strategic Plan. Within our five key pillars — resource management, stormwater management, workforce excellence, community engagement and enterprise resilience — we completed over 90 percent of our targeted outcomes. The Strategic Plan was ambitious in its volume of more than 140 action plans that spanned every facet of the MWRD's work. These goals ranged from new water quality standards, energy and phosphorus removal optimization, and stormwater capture volumes, to Information Technology innovations and public and employee communications. By meeting so many of these goals, our staff demonstrated their commitment to accomplishing our mission. Looking ahead, we are planning the next five-year cycle of strategic initiatives that will build on this strong foundation.

### **Protecting water quality**

Our seven water reclamation plants continued to deliver exceptional performance. In May, the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) announced we were the recipient of six Platinum Peak Performance Awards. These awards recognize five consecutive years of full compliance under National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit requirements. Five of these water reclamation plants have met these high standards for more than a decade. This means our plant staff captures the unpredictable flow of polluted water and stormwater inundation, cleans it and releases it back into the environment, reclaiming it all in a matter of hours. Achieving and sustaining this level of compliance amidst evolving regulations and increased flows is a tribute to our operations, maintenance, monitoring and engineering teams. We improved water quality downstream of our Egan Water Reclamation Plant by partnering with the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County and the DuPage River Salt Creek Workgroup; we removed a 90-year-old dam to improve fish and boat migration, improve local water quality, stabilize the streambank and attract new visitors. Along the Cal-Sag Channel, we also improved our Sidestream Elevated Pool Aeration Station in Blue Island and helped extend the Cal-Sag Trail 1.5 miles in Palos Hills.

## **Chicago Area Waterways**

Water quality in the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS) remains a priority. This year we completed a major connection from the Westchester Pumping Station into the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), further protecting water quality and reducing risk of overflows. The connection between the Westchester Pumping Station to TARP improves our capacity and reduces risk of untreated discharges. On the broader waterways front, our ecology, monitoring and community-access efforts reinforce our dual goals of environmental protection and public benefit. Throughout the year our sampling programs have revealed improvements in water quality to make the CAWS an inviting attraction.

### **Research**

Innovation remains central to our work. This year we advanced studies in nutrient recovery and winter algal blooms, real-time water quality monitoring, carbon management optimization, aeration tank performance, the presence of per and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), the growth of industrial hemp in biosolids, and an investigation into hydrogen sulfide levels in intercepting sewers. Connecting research to operational deployment ensures that our system remains resilient and forward looking.

### **Energy neutrality**

Our multi-year path to achieving energy neutrality moved forward in 2025. Through upgrades in efficiency, increased use of biogas and optimization of plant processes, we continue to reduce consumption and shift toward renewable-energy sources. The link between energy management and water quality performance grows ever stronger. Many of our plans for energy neutrality align with our Capital Improvement Program, while others will be evaluated to ensure they support the MWRD's core responsibilities.

### **Climate protection**

With climate-driven rainfall increasing and infrastructure stress, we adopted enhanced planning and mitigation strategies. Since releasing our first Climate Action Plan in 2023, the MWRD has made strong progress across all four strategy tiers that target direct emissions, renewable energy, future greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction

research and monitoring, and carbon management. As a result of this lengthy study and exercise, we achieved a nearly 40 percent reduction in GHG emissions compared to 2005 levels, surpassing the Strategic Plan 2021–2025 goal of 28 percent by 2025. Our plan was recognized by the International Water Association as a top three finalist out of a field of more than 90 international water utilities. We are not just responding to change, we are helping shape how utilities worldwide adapt and thrive.

## **Stormwater and climate resiliency**

The year's flood-protection commitments, including the Addison Creek Channel Improvements, Glenwood Levee completion along Thorn Creek and dozens of local stormwater management improvements across Cook County, reflect the reality that stormwater resilience is integral to our mission. These projects protect communities, reduce basement backups, improve public safety and support equity of service. Since 2014, we have invested approximately \$586 million toward the completion of 289 stormwater management projects that protect nearly 19,000 homes, businesses and buildings and represent a total investment of \$926 million.

## **Green infrastructure**

In our first decade of partnering on local stormwater management projects, over 120 green infrastructure projects have been completed. These projects provide a total of 13.2 million gallons of stormwater storage. In 2025 alone, we contributed \$4.4 million to 11 green infrastructure partnership projects which can capture more than 2.5 million gallons of stormwater that could otherwise overwhelm local sewers during heavy storm events. Each project helps retain stormwater, reduce runoff, improve habitat and enhance community space. Many of these projects were on full display in 2025 in public spaces designed to capture stormwater. Through our collaboration with Palos Heights and Lake Katherine Nature Center, we completed a new green parking lot with 45 parking spaces, 16 trees, and enough permeable pavers and bioswales to store an estimated 120,000 gallons of stormwater each time it rains. We partnered with the Village of Willow Springs on the construction of a series of green infrastructure improvements aimed at enhancing flood protection and sustainability. These

upgrades provide more than 1 million gallons of stormwater storage capacity, helping reduce the burden on the local sewer system and alleviate flooding in the area. In Markham, we completed three green alleys which will help reduce flooding by retaining more than 90,000 gallons of stormwater.

This was also a major year of progress in green infrastructure investments at schoolyards. We engaged with our Space to Grow™ partners from the city of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools, Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign to complete seven schoolyards in 2025, and we launched five more to be completed in 2026. These schoolyards give children a place to play while also capturing millions of gallons of stormwater each time it rains, thanks to new and improved permeable surface areas. In 2025, we expanded our schoolyard work to the suburbs, breaking ground on an inaugural program with a new schoolyard at Burnham Elementary School in Burnham.

## **Diversity, equity, environmental justice and inclusion**

Our commitment to an inclusive workforce and vendor outreach was strengthened in 2025. We hosted the Small Business Summit with over 300 guests and 55 exhibitors, welcomed new vendors and increased representation across our contracting and employment strategies. These efforts support not only operational excellence but broader community trust and participation. We began the process of modernizing contract compliance tracking and real-time monitoring of participation, workforce hours and goal attainment through a new software system. We also partnered with City Colleges of Chicago to establish an inaugural Wastewater Technology Certificate Program to recruit future workforce talent.

## **Celebrating culture**

In 2025, we celebrated two remarkable milestones: 125 years since the reversal of the Chicago River and 50 years of the Egan Water Reclamation Plant. These anniversaries highlight our enduring legacy of improving water quality and renewing communities, including helping make the Chicago River Swim possible for the first time in a century. Throughout the year, we honored our workforce and the communities we serve with

heritage month observances, flag-raising ceremonies, and open house events. Celebrating culture and history strengthens the connection between our mission and the people of Cook County.

## **Community engagement**

This year's open house events, facility tours, and outreach forums welcomed residents, students and stakeholders to learn about wastewater treatment, stormwater management, river ecology and infrastructure. The more our community understands our work, the more effective our partnership becomes. We welcomed international delegations from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Singapore and water professionals from all over the world to tour our facilities and exchange knowledge. Our Community Partnership Councils (CPCs) continue to provide a vital two-way voice between the MWRD and the communities near our facilities. In 2025 we expanded CPC participation at our Stickney Water Reclamation Plant and began shaping new project engagement models that start at the planning phase rather than after design. Lastly, our Overflow Action Day Alerts in partnership with Friends of the Chicago River have become a national outreach model in promoting water conservation; the City of Chicago's Office of Emergency Management and media outlets across the region, which include CBS 2, NBC 5, ABC 7, WGN-TV, WBBM-AM, WTTW, the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, helped amplify our Overflow Action Day Alerts to ensure residents received timely information.

## **Financial stewardship**

Our fiscal discipline provides the foundation for everything we do. We maintained strong credit ratings and transparent financial reporting. In November Fitch Ratings reaffirmed our AAA credit rating, while we maintained AA+ rating from S&P Global Ratings. In 2025, we also received the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association for the 49th consecutive year. We were also proud to report that our Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB) Trust is fully funded, thanks to solid investment returns and asset growth. This fiscal strength empowers us to pursue vital projects in water

quality, infrastructure, climate resilience, and community protection, ensuring affordability and accountability remain uncompromised.

## **Conclusion**

The achievements of 2025 reflect a convergence of mission driven investment, operational excellence, research infused innovation, community engagement and fiscal strength. As we move into the next chapter, the MWRD is well positioned thanks to our staff, our Board, our partners, and the public we serve. I extend my sincere thanks to each person and organization that has contributed to our success. Together, we will continue to protect and enhance the region's water environment and reduce flooding damages to provide a healthier future for all. Thank you for your continued trust and collaboration.

