



**Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago**

# President's Annual Message 2023: A Year in Review



In 2023, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago's (MWRD) key goals aimed to provide excellence in stormwater management, wastewater treatment, climate change accountability, and fiscal responsibility. We successfully advanced those goals.

We completed the Addison Creek Reservoir to provide flood relief to Bellwood, Northlake, Stone Park, Melrose Park, Westchester and Broadview. We cut the ribbon on the \$7.7-million Crestwood Flood Control Project. We joined the Village of Niles to inaugurate the Golf Mill Park stormwater project to capture more stormwater, mitigate flooding and improve area water quality. Dozens of other stormwater management projects on the north, west and south sides of Cook County were also launched. Additionally, by working with our federal and local partners we leveraged an additional \$36 million for projects to alleviate flooding in Cook County.

Meanwhile, we advanced groundbreaking research to address water pollutants, securing an official United States patent with our partners at Iowa State University Research Foundation for technology to remove dissolved solids from wastewater as part of a unique algae recovery system that aims to reduce carbon emissions and recover nutrients to improve water quality. As the world braces for the unpredictability of climate change, our Board of Commissioners adopted a climate action plan that guides us in reducing greenhouse gas emissions to thwart the crippling effects of global warming, flooding, and pollution that threaten the region's water resources.

Our commitment to fiscal responsible stewardship and professional management were also recognized this year. Fitch Ratings again affirmed the MWRD's AAA credit rating. Moody's Investor Services upgraded the MWRD's credit rating to Aa1. And the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) honored the MWRD with platinum awards including Excellence in Management.

This year we set out to provide excellence in stormwater management, wastewater treatment, climate change accountability, and fiscal responsibility. And we did. Here is a deeper look at outstanding achievements from the year that was 2023.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kari K. Steele". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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

## **Fiscal Accountability**

Fitch Ratings again affirmed the MWRD's AAA credit rating for responsible financial stewardship as the MWRD works to protect the regional water environment. The Aug. 4 report from Fitch highlighted the MWRD's reliable revenue stream, lower operating cost burdens and improvements in debt structuring to fund capital projects and meet the MWRD's pension and retirement obligations. Shortly thereafter, Moody's Investor Services upgraded the MWRD's credit rating to Aa1. We are proud of these strong credit ratings that reinforce our commitment to our taxpayers and our prudent management to put these valued tax dollars to work to protect our water environment. Without this strong fiscal management in place, we could not serve 5.19 million residents living across Chicago and 128 communities. Additionally, the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada (GFOA) recognized us with a Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for the 47th consecutive year.

In 2023 the GFOA also honored the MWRD with the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for the 2022 Budget, Certificates of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for the MWRD Retirement Fund. These accolades and strong credit ratings align with our five-year Strategic Plan goals of enterprise resilience initiatives to maintain strong fiscal management.

## **Platinum Awards**

The National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) honored the MWRD with platinum awards including the Excellence in Management (EIM) Platinum Recognition award for our commitment to sustainable, successful programs and six Platinum Peak Performance awards for having six Water Reclamation Plants (WRPs) extend a streak of more than five years of achieving 100 percent compliance in meeting National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits. Despite torrential rainstorms, urban runoff and more than 400 billion gallons of wastewater each year, the MWRD staff has been undeterred in meeting stringent permits and our mission by transforming wastewater and stormwater into clean water to protect Cook County's water environment.

## **Utility of the Future Today Honoree**

At the Water Environment Federation's Technical Exhibition and Conference (WEFTEC) held in October at McCormick Place, we were recognized for a third time as a Utility of the Future Today. NACWA, WEF, The Water Research Foundation, WaterReuse Association, and U.S. Water Alliance with support from the Environmental Protection Agency Office of Wastewater Management, and the Department of Energy Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy recognized the MWRD as an agency

that is forward-thinking and a leader in sustainability and resiliency. The MWRD was first recognized in 2016, followed by honors in 2020 for watershed management and partnership and engagement in 2023.

## **Stormwater Authority and Unprecedented Rainstorms**

With the increasing prevalence of unpredictable storms, twice this summer our communities experienced record-breaking rainfalls. We commend Governor JB Pritzker for his decisive action in declaring Cook County a disaster area resulting from massive storms that took place on July 2 and 3. The devastating storms reminded us of the continued collaboration, investment and attention to stormwater management and infrastructure required. Few local sewers have capacity to handle these rain totals and convey this flow to the MWRD's intercepting sewers and Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP) infrastructure. We have many partners joining us in our commitment to mitigate flooding and improve Cook County local community's stormwater systems. Our wastewater treatment plants operate around the clock to manage excess water coming from communities within our 882-square-mile service area, including capturing combined stormwater and sewage. The fact is additional layers of green infrastructure and other stormwater drainage capacity is needed to further protect the communities we serve. Our Stormwater Partnership Program allows us to expand our efforts to engage communities for collaboration on stormwater improvement projects.

We acknowledge that climate change is real, and recent record-breaking rain totals confirm that. In response to this new reality, my office launched proactive community engagement with local media, affected communities and the Chicago Office of Emergency Management and Communication to increase awareness of Overflow Action Day Alerts. The public can sign up at [mwrld.org](http://mwrld.org) to receive OAD alerts via text or email throughout the year. Our executive staff, engineers and I attended numerous community meetings and heard the devastating concerns of residents severely affected by these storms in Chicago's West and South sides, in Austin, Burnham, Berwyn, Calumet City, Cicero and Harvey. We provided details of our role and capacities to capture billions of gallons of stormwater, next steps for recovery and shared resources for relief efforts and funding. Today, we continue to work with municipalities throughout the county to identify and construct projects that may prevent such occurrences in the future.

## **Addison Creek Stormwater Improvements**

We celebrated the first of two major stormwater management projects placed into service to protect six communities from flooding in August. The MWRD and partners cut the ribbon on the new Addison Creek

Reservoir and kicked off the Addison Creek Channel improvements. The projects will provide flood relief to Bellwood, Northlake, Stone Park, Melrose Park, Westchester and Broadview. The 600-acre-foot Addison Creek Reservoir in Bellwood will hold 195 million gallons of storage capacity and connect with the Addison Creek Channel, where additional improvements will reduce overbank flooding to approximately 2,200 structures, including an estimated 1,700 structures that will be removed from the flood plain.

## **New Stormwater Infrastructure in Crestwood**

In October, we cut the ribbon on the \$7.7-million Crestwood Flood Control Project that improved the Crestwood Drainage Ditch and added new stormwater infrastructure. As a result, more than 80 homes and structures throughout Crestwood have new storm protection and flood relief.

## **Flood Relief for Nearly 100 Structures in the Village of Niles**

In commemoration of Arbor Day in April, we joined the Village of Niles to cut the ribbon on a new park facility with trees planted along the perimeter to incorporate green infrastructure elements and permeable pavement to capture more stormwater, mitigate flooding and improve area water quality. The approximately \$11 million Golf Mill Park stormwater project, for which the MWRD committed \$2 million, will provide flood relief for nearly 100 structures in a 200-acre area lot on Niles' northwest side. The new park will store 4.5 million gallons of stormwater, while also expanding and improving Golf Mill Park.

## **New Climate Action Plan**

In May, our Board of Commissioners adopted a groundbreaking climate action plan that guides us in reducing greenhouse gas emissions to thwart the devastating effects of global warming, flooding and pollution that threaten the region's water resources.

## **MWRD President Welcomes WEFTEC to Chicago**

As MWRD President, it was an honor to welcome more than 20,000 visitors from around the world to WEFTEC, the largest water industry conference of its kind in North America. MWRD staff and commissioners gave lectures and speeches, participated in workshops and met industry vendors to share best practices. Our Second City Sewer Crew competed and won second place in the Operations Challenge.

## **Spotlight on Prioritizing Diversity, Equity, Environmental Justice and Inclusion**

We took major strides this year in advancing equitable approaches to the diverse communities we serve across Cook County.

In January, the Board of Commissioners adopted a new environmental justice policy to integrate diversity considerations into all MWRD programs, policies and activities wherever possible.

Our Environmental Justice Unit continued amplifying its work by expanding partnerships and advancing our work in community engagement and workforce excellence. Our Diversity Section won numerous awards, participated in many outreach events with assist agencies and business partners and held a successful Diverse Business Summit on Oct. 17 at Kennedy-King College which brought together talented entrepreneurs and emerging businesses with established firms and government agencies. Out of a total value of \$196.6 million in MWRD contracts in 2023, about \$60.2 million, or 30.6 percent of that contract value, went to minority, women, small and veteran-owned business enterprises.

Our 2023 Strategic Initiative Outcomes included participating in 29 external events, resulting in engagement with over 200 new vendors, creating a Vendor 101 Orientation Class, implementing quarterly meetings with Assist Agencies and participating in the Government Procurement Committee forum in conjunction with Sister Agencies.

## **Welcome New Commissioners**

This is the first full year for MWRD Commissioners Yumeka Brown, Patricia Theresa Flynn and Dan Pogorzelski. In June, Patricia Theresa Flynn was elected by her peers to serve as Vice President replacing Kimberly Du Buclet, who was appointed to serve as a state representative in the Illinois General Assembly.

A few weeks later, Gov. JB Pritzker appointed Precious Brady-Davis to the MWRD Board of Commissioners. Commissioner Brady-Davis is the first Black openly transgender woman appointed to public office in Cook County history.

## **United States Patent Received**

It was another groundbreaking year of research and innovation. An official United States patent was granted to the MWRD and partners at Iowa State University Research Foundation for technology to remove dissolved solids from wastewater as part of a unique algae recovery system that aims to reduce carbon emissions and recover nutrients to improve water quality.

## **Studying Nutrient Loss at Fulton County Field Day**

An annual tradition in downstate Fulton County presented an opportunity for collaboration between the MWRD and the agricultural community to protect water quality throughout the world. These efforts and research will help farmers and water reclamation plants protect soil and water health by managing nutrients and reducing runoff and pollution into our waterways. The event near Canton, Illinois in June was made possible through a partnership between the MWRD and the Illinois Farm Bureau.

## **MWRD Outreach**

The MWRD reopened its doors to tours of its facilities, and in May held open houses for all ages for the first time since the pandemic began. We welcomed more than 1,000 visitors at our Water Reclamation Plants located throughout Cook County in Chicago, Cicero, Des Plaines, Hanover Park, Schaumburg and Skokie. MWRD virtual tours reached hundreds of people to learn about the MWRD's mission to treat wastewater and manage stormwater.

We also continued national-themed events, recognizing Black History Month, Women's History Month, Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, Pride Month, Juneteenth and Latinx Heritage.

## **Legislative Presence**

In April, I visited Washington, D.C. along with former Vice President Kimberly Du Buclet to ensure that our mission to protect the health and safety of the public in our service areas and our work to protect the quality of the water supply source (Lake Michigan) remains a priority. We met with many key stakeholders, Congressmen and Illinois Senators to discuss various MWRD topics.

In May, the MWRD Board of Commissioners and I traveled to the Illinois State Capitol to meet with members of the Illinois General Assembly to inform them of ongoing MWRD work and projects, and to garner support for MWRD legislative initiatives. We are pleased to report our legislative goals were successfully accomplished and our submitted bills were passed. We appreciate our legislative leaders in both Springfield and Washington, D.C. for their continuous support in moving the MWRD agenda forward.

## **Sustainability Summit**

In November, we hosted our 11th Annual Sustainability Summit. Topics covered stormwater management, carbon reduction, climate resilience, wildlife conservation and the protection of invaluable water resources.

The event featured an impressive lineup of speakers and honored outstanding individuals, municipalities, firms, partners and organizations for their contributions to sustainability.

## **Expanding International Relationships**

In February, MWRD Chairman of Finance Marcelino Garcia, Vice President Patricia Theresa Flynn, and current and retired MWRD staff traveled to India for the 5th Annual International Conference and Expo on Water and Waste Management. The group provides a learning exchange platform for governments, industry and the public. In October, we signed a memorandum of understanding at the Consulate General of Denmark with the Danish Water Technology Alliance and Aarhus Vand A/S of Denmark (Aarhus Water) who agreed to extend the knowledge exchange program first implemented in 2015. Since that time, our partnership has flourished, creating a ripple effect of positive change.

In November, I was proud to represent the MWRD and our country at a learning exchange in Denmark during the U.S. High Level Water Policy Delegation hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and Denmark's State of Green. During my visit I was responsible for presenting an overview of the MWRD and our essential responsibilities, as well as participating in various round-table discussions about water issues near and far. The topics included climate change, wastewater treatment, stormwater management, nutrient runoff, biosolids, PFAS, microplastics, cyber security in the wastewater sector and energy efficiency to name a few. It was a valuable, robust information exchange occupied with conversation and think-tank sessions about how we can all work together to protect our water and environment.

## **Conclusion**

Just as water's flow reaches every corner of the world, so, too, has the network of partners that the MWRD has collaborated with to implement innovative practices in water reclamation and the recovery of renewable resources. In the world of water that we oversee and are held accountable for, we have achieved many remarkable milestones in 2023, but there is still more work to be done.

The challenges and opportunities that lie ahead are boundless, and there is more appreciation for the essential services we provide. I thank everyone at the MWRD, our partners, colleagues in the water industry and the many communities for a successful 2023, and I wish you all a safe and fulfilling 2024. As a leader in the water industry, we were determined to exceed expectations in 2023 and we confidently look forward to conquering any obstacles in the future. I like to regularly remind our more than 1800 employees that together we accomplish more, and teamwork makes the dream work.

