



# MASSACHUSETTS Rivers Alliance

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October 27, 2021

The Honorable Rebecca Rausch, Senate Chair  
Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture  
State House Room 218, Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Carolyn Dykema, House Chair  
Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture  
State House Room 473F, Boston, MA 02133

**Re: Support for H.898/S.530, *An Act relative to maintaining adequate water supplies through effective drought management***

Chair Rausch, Chair Dykema, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of H.898/S.530, *An Act relative to maintaining adequate water supplies through effective drought management*.

The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance is a statewide nonprofit organization with 80 member groups and over 1000 individual supporting members. Our mission is to protect and restore the rivers and streams of the Commonwealth. Today we urge the committee to report this legislation out favorably.

Massachusetts has dealt with persistent drought for the past few years that has decimated our aquatic ecosystems. In 2016, we experienced extreme drought conditions statewide. In 2020 those conditions returned, rolling into 2021. Although this past summer saw heavy precipitation, drought conditions persisted, especially on Cape Cod. Many streams had record low flows, and many didn't flow at all.

Scientists at EPA, USGS, and NOAA predict that droughts in Massachusetts will become more frequent and more severe due to climate change. It is imperative that the Commonwealth has a coordinated, impactful response to drought conditions.

Currently, our response to drought varies by municipality. Each city or town implements its own water conservation measures, leading to a patchwork of policies that provides limited relief to our water basins. If only some towns in each watershed are conserving water, the overall water savings is minimal. In order to get through drought more quickly and more resiliently, municipalities should work together to conserve water.

This bill:

- gives the Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs the authority to require uniform water conservation measures that apply to all water users across drought regions;
- codifies the existing Drought Management Task Force in statute.

Limiting nonessential outdoor watering during drought is a cost-effective first line of defense against drought. Essential water use, like that for agriculture and golf courses, is exempt from these restrictions, as is indoor water use. The water conservation measures increase as drought worsens, as laid out in the state's 2019 Drought Management Plan.

This legislation is essential to ensure that Massachusetts handles drought more responsibly. Right now, the Governor has the authority to require water conservation measures only during a full-blown emergency, at which point our state would be experiencing crop failures, increased fire danger, loss of aquatic life, and threats to water supply. It is far more prudent to conserve water in the early stages of drought in order to prevent such emergencies from occurring.

The 2016 drought had severe impacts: groundwater levels that supply many towns' drinking water supply declined, six public water suppliers petitioned MassDEP for water emergency declarations, and the Quabbin Reservoir decreased by over 20%. It is estimated that cranberry growers lost about one-third of their harvest due to the drought. But because there was no uniformity among towns in the state's seven drought regions, some towns imposed total bans on outdoor water use, while neighboring towns had no restrictions. This created inequities across towns and confusing messaging for residents. To better prepare for drought and protect our waterways, we must coordinate water conservation across regions.

The Drought Management Plan includes comprehensive drought response plans. Unfortunately, the plan's contents are only recommendations; the state still lacks the authority to require water conservation in a drought unless there is a declared emergency. Passing H.898/S.530 would put the Drought Management Plan into action, and allow the state to require a gradual escalation of uniform outdoor watering restrictions during drought.

Massachusetts has been a leader on climate mitigation and adaptation. This legislation provides an opportunity to increase our climate readiness by scaling up our drought response and water conservation efforts.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact me ([katharinelange@massriversalliance.org](mailto:katharinelange@massriversalliance.org)) with any questions or if there is any additional information we may provide.

Sincerely,



Katharine Lange  
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Massachusetts Rivers Alliance