# 2020 ANNUAL BEPOR mrwc-fairfield.org

Photo by Tara Benyei

## PRESIDENT'S

### REPORT



"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."

John Muir (1901), Our National Parks, p.1.

This 100 year old quote came to mind as I reflected on the changes in our community over the last year. For very good reasons, many have focused on what this pandemic has taken from us, but I began to think about what it has given us. To be sure, I have experienced my share of fear and concern about this virus. But this last year has also been a time of reflection, taking care of things put off too long and reconnecting to nature and those closest to me.

By focusing attention on the vibrance of colors during walks in the woods, the sounds of a waterfall and the smell of a fire surrounded by friends under the stars, my family regained the gifts of nature in our lives and replaced many of the digital experiences that previously occupied our time.

This has also been my approach in my first months as President of MRWC. Building on the amazing work of my predecessor, Lynn Shavinsky, and the entire Board, we took the time during the pandemic as an opportunity to reimagine our organization and how we pursue its long-standing mission. To support remote learning, we constructed materials that allowed students to immerse themselves in ecological science without leaving their homes. We also developed and presented new educational programs to small groups in our community, leveraged volunteers for several cleanups around Fairfield, and established a new team of volunteers that are monitoring the health of our local waterways as part of a national program, all while following strict COVID-19 protocols.

There is no doubt that the pandemic inhibited our ability to operate as we have in the past. Maybe that was also a benefit derived from this terrible experience. It slowed our pace, reminding us how much we value time outdoors in open spaces. It challenged us to rethink how we educate and engage our community about the preservation of our natural resources. Most importantly, it allowed us to begin branching outside of our focus on watersheds and reinvigorate our calling to advocate for the protection of our natural world.

As we consider all of this, I believe John Muir was undoubtedly correct. Fairfield residents, including an influx of new neighbors from cities, tired and shaken from this pandemic, are now remembering that our natural resources are essential in our vibrant community and deserve to be protected. While we continue to evolve our approach, MRWC's dedication to our mission remains steadfast. We appreciate your continued support as we introduce conservation to a wider audience so we all can enjoy these "fountains of life" for generations to come.

# **COMMUNITY**A SAMPLING OF EVENTS











 $TOP\ L\ to\ R:\ Members\ pose\ with\ Joy\ at\ the\ 2nd\ Annual\ Founder's\ Walk,\ SASO\ volunteers\ at\ Rockland\ Park\ MIDDLE\ L\ to\ R:\ Winter\ walk\ at\ Perry's\ Mill\ Ponds$ 

BOTTOM L to R: Future "Warriors" at water monitoring training, Kids attend a new educational program at our outdoor classroom

### **KUDOS**

#### AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

We held our first ever Virtual Picnic to honor the following volunteers for their commitment to the River-Lab Program. As part of the fun, we played Bingo for prizes. Heidi Gassel and Dabney Bowen each won gift certificates to local restaurants.

#### Kingfisher Badge

Guided at least 1 study-trip per grade level and at least 10 study-trips total

Samantha Anderson Robin Bernier Dabney Bowen Sally Connolly Nancy Fuller

#### 5 Year Award

Guided at least 5 years and received Kingfisher Badge

Samantha Anderson Carrie Rullo

#### 10 Year Award

Guided at least 10 years and received Kingfisher Badge

Christina Rescsanski

**Retiring Program Director** Nicole Nuttall

Retiring from Board of Directors Charlene Brauns-Schindler

#### MRWC SCHOLARSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Each year, MRWC recognizes a senior from Fairfield Ludlowe and Warde High Schools for their study of and commitment to science and the environment. For generations, River-Lab Program volunteers have provided over 120,000 Fairfield students with unique opportunities to explore environmental science in a local watershed. We hope this scholarship encourages students to become leaders in environmental stewardship.



#### Fairfield Ludlowe High School Recipient

Devenny Widmer attends
University of Connecticut, double
majoring in Wildlife Management
and Natural Resources and the
Environment. She realized her
passion for nature when she was
very young, hiking with her family,
helping rehabilitate animals on
her small backyard farm, and
participating in outdoor activities
like River-Lab. Through her
academic, research, and outreach
pursuits, Devenny is working
to be part of the solution for a
healthy environment.



#### Fairfield Warde High School Recipient

Jakob Newman advanced his interest in science by splitting his days between Warde and the Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science Center all four years of high school. He now attends Clark University, majoring in Environmental Science. He explains, "The discipline of environmental science will become more important in the coming decades with food sustainability, water treatment and energy research being three key challenges the world will face. I want to help humanity move toward a cleaner future."





#### **PAM RITTER**

Pam Ritter, a dear friend to MRWC for almost our entire history, passed away late November 2020.

#### 30 years of service, 28 years on Board, 126 study-trips

Pam became a River-Lab guide in 1971, beginning thirty years of dedicated service to MRWC. Over that time, Pam guided 126 study-trips and assisted with the week-long Mill River Ranger summer program for 3 years. Those weeks of the Ranger program saw Pam guiding while rowing a boat full of young rangers on the Mill River and in estuaries along the Long Island Sound! In addition to her strong participation in the River-Lab Program, Pam served on the MRWC Board of Directors for 28 years, including 9 years as Vice President and another 9 years as President.

#### Legacy of Research, Writing and Advocacy

Pam's continuing contributions are largely the result of her involvement with state and local environmental issues through her connection with the League of Women Voters. Her support and approval were indispensable to MRWC founder, Joy Shaw, as she delivered written remarks to the team authoring the 1972 Connecticut bill that finally regulated use of inland wetlands and watercourses. Joy's remarks were well received and became the "preamble" to the final bill. Locally, Pam's advice on whom to address and how to proceed strengthened the objection raised by Joy and subsequent letters that resulted in changes to the Mill River Trunk Sewer line from its original plan through the old Mill Riverbed in the River-Lab Area to a far more environmentally benign route through the floodplain on the west side.

The comment that follows is an excerpt from a tribute to Pam in the 2001 MRWC Annual Report issued as she retired from the Board in 2002:

"Pam's deep connection with nature compels her unshirking response to the need for more care in any critical environmental area. She is a true blue environmentalist with a keen level of concern for...all that is sensitive on the planet Earth. We are humbly grateful for...her long and inspiring service with MRWC."

Even after her retirement from the Board, Pam remained a dedicated advocate for MRWC. Her impressive record of volunteer service inspires us all. We plan to further honor her memory later this year and will share additional information in the coming months.

## **EDUCATE**HIGHLIGHTS

#### **Developed 2 Virtual Experiences For Students**

When schools moved to fully remote learning in March, we were days away from the start of Grade 5 student study-trips to the Mill River. In response, a very special group of volunteers developed online materials to enhance student learning without requiring an actual trip to the river. While maintaining social distancing, these volunteers recorded and edited videos, created informational slideshows and designed activities to immerse students in the ecosystem right outside their window anytime – on-demand.

The fall brought a return to school, but no study-trips. As a result, we constructed and rolled out more online materials – this time in support of Grade 4 student learning. These virtual experiences provide opportunities for students to explore the science of watersheds and appreciate the connections between humans and the Earth. While we eagerly await the return of students to guided study-trips, we are excited about this new direction for our River-Lab Program.

#### **Launched Community Education Programs**

In order to support students and families eager for outdoor educational activities during non-school hours, and in compliance with CDC COVID-19 guidelines, we launched a new way to explore environmental science at the Mill River. Our first four small group sessions filled to maximum capacity within days of their announcement in November. Buoyed by the overwhelming community support and enthusiastic feedback from participants, plans are underway to offer more sessions and explore new topics this spring. Check your email or our website for information on upcoming sessions.

#### **Special Thanks**

It has been an especially busy time for our dedicated Curriculum Committee volunteers who collaborated remotely to make these initiatives a success: Samantha Anderson, Carol Barrios, Alison Genovese, Sara Jannott, Juli Karacsonyi, Nicole Nuttall, Magda Nyiri, Christina Rescsanski, Carrie Rullo, Subha Sunder and Nikki Vinoski. A special shout out goes to Bob Gassel and high school students Clayton Nyiri and George Karacsonyi for their invaluable video recording and editing skills.

"I just wanted to let you know that my kids LOVED the class today and asked if they could go to another. I hope there are more in the future."

- Melanie Heiser

"The girls loved it!!! They had so much fun and they learned a lot. They especially enjoyed making the model." - Svetlana Gavric









#### Aquarion Southwest Regional Pipeline (SWRP) Diversion Permit Application

MRWC partnered with other advocacy groups to publicize concerns about a permit application filed just as many of us were reeling from the shutdown of schools and businesses across the state due to the pandemic. In mid-March 2020, Aquarion Water Company submitted the application to the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) seeking approval to transfer up to 14.2 million gallons of water per day for 25 years from its Greater Bridgeport System to lower Fairfield County. If approved, this would double the water volume Aquarion currently diverts to those towns from Greater Bridgeport through their SWRP. The primary source of supply would be the Hemlocks Reservoir System, including the Hemlocks Reservoir which flows into Cricker Brook, an important tributary to the Mill River.

Alongside Fairfielders Protecting Land and Neighborhoods (FairPLAN), Rivers Alliance, Southwest Conservation District, Lake Hills Association (LHA), and Save the Sound, MRWC has been a leading voice for concerned citizens during the ongoing CT DEEP application review process. We have participated in public meetings, pushing for answers regarding the need for this substantial increase over such a long duration, as well as the application's impact upon water quality, the environment, water usage, and conservation.

In January 2021, CT DEEP issued a tentative determination of approval for Aquarion's application. Since then, the Town of Fairfield Conservation Department has filed an intervention request and has been granted Intervenor status. As an organization with an interest in the outcome of these proceeding, and in support of the Town's filing, MRWC, along with LHA, and FairPLAN, filed jointly for Intervenor status in March 2021. As an Intervenor, MRWC will have standing to be actively involved in the permit request proceedings and able to present evidence and ask questions.

#### **Rooster River Flooding Mitigation**

The Rooster River, which originates in Trumbull and flows through Bridgeport and Fairfield, has a long history of flooding the Stratfield area of town. One of the most significant floods occurred in September 2018, with flash flooding of roads, yards, basements and first floors reported by many Fairfield residents along the river. Since then, MRWC, the Stratfield Village Association, and the Friends of the Rooster River have participated in four public meetings with town officials regarding this issue.

At the most recent meeting in November 2020, the town and consultants from Milone & MacBroom proposed 6 sites where stormwater detention areas could be constructed to reduce the frequency and severity of flooding along the Rooster River. These detention areas allow stormwater to accumulate in areas designed to contain the surge and then release it at a much slower rate over a sustained timeframe, thereby reducing erosion and controlling the water volume flowing to downstream properties.

Past development has reduced the absorptive capacity within the Rooster River watershed as a whole through the filling of floodplain areas, diverting the river using concrete walls, and burying portions of the river underground in culverts. Storm drains, installed to support development by directing storm water into the river, add even more volume when the river is already swollen by heavy rain. The proposed detention areas will provide at least some relief from flooding of properties and streets. However, these are expensive, man-made replacements for the original river floodplain and wetlands which naturally handle intense rain events.

As students of ecology, we recognize this as a warning about the long-term consequences of altering the natural environment to suit human desires. Our watersheds need more advocates at every stage of property development. You are encouraged to join the conversation at the next public meeting, anticipated later this year.

Follow MRWC on our website and social media to stay up to date on these efforts and more!

## **ENGAGE**HIGHLIGHTS

#### Launched a Water Monitoring Program

Since October, fifty enthusiastic Water Warriors have sampled water from 8 locations each month, including Mill and Rooster Rivers, Ash Creek and Southport Estuaries, and Lake Mohegan. We launched our local water monitoring program so individuals could contribute to science while enjoying the outdoors and adhering to CDC COVID-19 safety protocols. Partnering with Warde High School Senior, Claire Cohenuram, a member of EarthEcho's Youth Leadership Council, MRWC joined one of the world's largest citizen science projects.

Water monitoring requires one brief training session, designed and delivered by Claire. MRWC and EarthEcho provide the test kits. Local volunteers collect water samples, perform simple tests, and record data on 6 key water quality indicators: water temperature, turbidity, pH, dissolved oxygen, nitrate and phosphate concentrations. Tracking these variables over time allows us to quickly identify changes in water conditions and scope projects to remediate and sustain our community's vital waterways.

In addition to the local impact, we share our data with the other 1.6 million EarthEcho Water Challenge volunteers in 146 countries, thereby contributing to an international effort to conserve and protect precious water resources across the planet. We are so proud of our progress and hope to expand this program in 2021. For more information, or to join this initiative, visit our website: https://mrwc-fairfield.org/water-monitoring-warriors

#### Created a New Fundraising Platform from an Old Favorite

With the help of seasoned BINGO caller, Lisa Johnson, MRWC hosted two virtual game nights that entertained families and friends during lockdown, while supporting our fundraising goals.

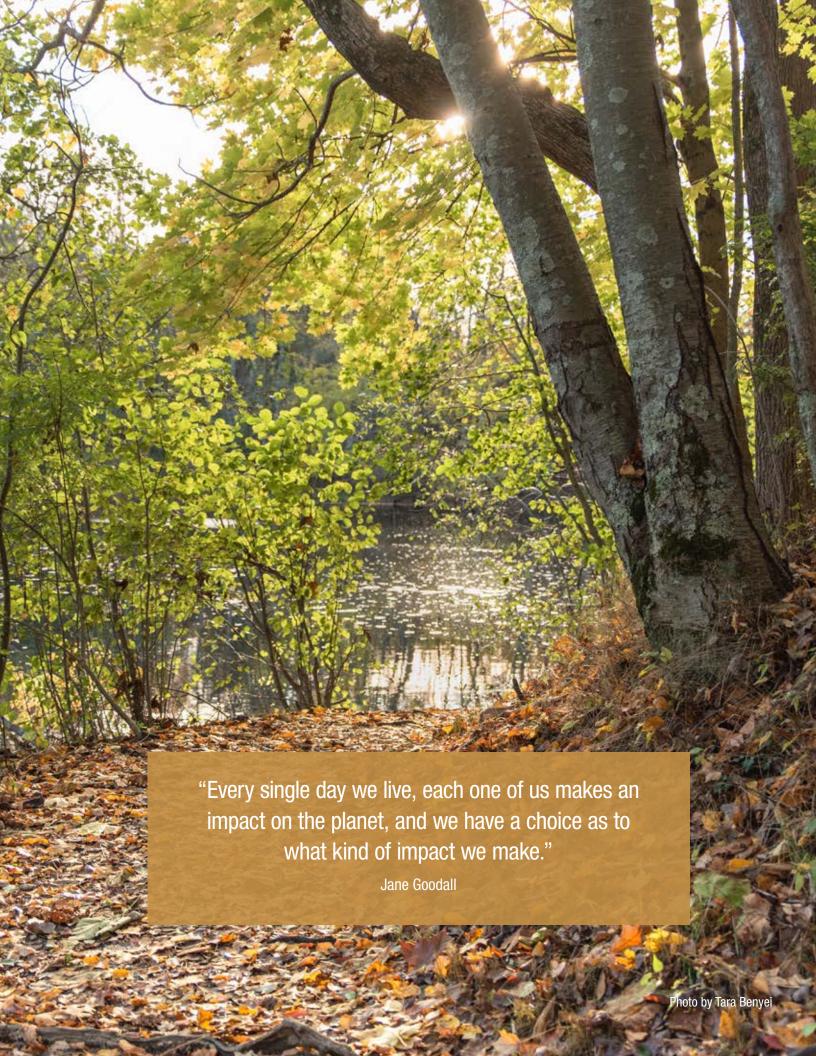
#### "The kids love doing this."

- Paul Piorek, St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School Teacher











#### \$10-49

Janine Alianielo Frances Baldwin Linda Chandler Sally Connolly Anne DiFrancesco Christine Dilley Maria DiPierro Frank DiZoglio, Jr. Jana Joham George Markley Cristin McCarthy-Vahey Ellen & Kevin Moore Linda Murphy Sandra & Thomas Naughton Josephine Olsen Cassandra Walker

#### \$50-99

Ash Creek Conservation Association Charlene Brauns-Schindler B. Skubly Butts Mary Beth Colleran Alli diBonaventura Lynn Fantom & Fred Stern Alan Feldman Deb & Josh Garskof Alison Genovese Margaret Gray Lori Hashizume & Douglas Fried Laura Jordan Reini & Michael Knorr Christine Magliocco Beverly Shavinsky Blake & Jennifer Titrud

#### \$100-199

Mary Beth Colleran CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Margaret Fitzgerald Donna Gallo Marcy Golden Douglas & Claudia Hoffman Sara Jannott Kathleen and Robert Kane Maureen Kane Brian Kelahan Elizabeth Kontomerkos Jason Meersman Dr. William C. Nash Michele Onofrio Dan Pengue Mindy Powlishen Ruscito & Head Family Foundation Barbara & Walter Siemon Elizabeth Sweeney Scott Thompson Roger Van Voorhees

#### \$200-499

Steve Baker
Kiersten Chou
Brian Fagan
Fairfield Garden Club
Mary Hogue & Guy
Gleysteen
The Keppler Family
Steve & Kate O'Mahony
Sasqua Garden Club
Subha Sunder
Mike Widmer
Jill & Rick Woolworth
Paul Zwynenburg

We express heartfelt thanks to all who supported our work in 2020. Every contribution helps us educate our community about the value of watersheds, advocate for their continued protection, and engage all people in the fight to protect our environment.

Photo by Tara Benyei

#### \$500-999

Janet Banks-Mott & Peter T. Mott Burr Elementary School PTA Timothy Dwight School PTA Holland Hill School PTA Jennings School PTA The Ruth Krauss Foundation Roger Ludlowe Middle School PTA McKinley School PTA Mill Hill School PTA, Inc. Michael Money The North Stratfield PTA Osborn Hill School PTA Riverfield School PTA Stratfield PTA, Inc. Tomlinson Middle School

#### \$1000+

PTA

Fairfield Woods Middle School PTSA Marta Jo Lawrence David & Elizabeth McKinnis Irwin and Dorothy Nessel Foundation Nicole & Paul Nuttall Carrie & Steve Rullo Jocelyn T. Shaw Roger Sherman School PTA Town of Fairfield

#### MATCHING GIFT COMPANIES

The Bank of America Charitable Foundation Robert Half

#### GIFTS IN HONOR OF

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Adelman Lynn Fantom & Fred Stern Joy Shaw Jill & Rick Woolworth

#### GIFTS IN MEMORY OF

Tricia Money Michael Money Harry L. Shaw Jocelyn T. Shaw

#### **GOODS AND SERVICES**

Samantha Anderson Steve Baker Carol Barrios Tara Benyei Photography Dabney Bowen Yoana Brecker Carley Brown Linda Chandler Kiersten Chou Roberta Clark

Claire Cohenuram Kate Compton Jon Dilley EarthEcho International Nancy Fuller **Bob Gassel** Heidi Gassel Alison Genovese Maddie Herron Mary Hogue Sara Jannott Joanne Lacrete Lisa Johnson George Karacsonyi Juli Karacsonvi Reini Knorr Susan Knox Sarah Neafsev The Neary Family Nori Studios Nicole Nuttall Clayton Nyiri Maqda Nyiri Kate O'Mahony Daniel Pollack Mindy Powlishen Christina Rescsanski Carrie Rullo Scholars and Athletes Serving Others, Fairfield Chapter Lynn Shavinsky Jocelyn T. Shaw

Subha Sunder Sustainable Fairfield Task Force Nikki Vinoski Mike Widmer Sydney Woo

### **VOLUNTEERS**

Samantha Anderson Rachel Aroeste Faith Aronson Jennifer Avers Steven Baker Amv Barrett Carol Barrios John Bavers Jill Bennett Lori Blessey Erin Blute Amv Boland Ashley Bongiovani Dabney Bowen Suzanne Brancale Charlene Brauns-Schindler Lvnne Brocklesby Amy Broderick Aniyah Brunson Jessica Campbell **Brian Carroll** Sophia Ceconi Nicole Chiravuri Hannah Choi Kiersten Chou Roberta Clark Anne Christine Cochran Shari Cohen Claire Cohenuram Mike Cohenuram MaryAnne Cristodero

Kelly Crusio Paula Cunningham Kelly Curtin Jessica Curtis Amy Dean Finley Dean Jon Dilley Maria DiPierro Patrick Donovan Viset Eanq Mat Edelson Laura Equale Don Fairbanks Jen Ferrando Julie Finneran Aidan Fisher Dan Forgie Miriam Frank Sam Frank Tom French Erin Fusco Nicole Gammino **Bob Gassel** Heidi Gassel Ben Gassell Jennifer Geaney Alison Genovese Maureen Greco Cathy Grosshart Carol Guernsev **Daniel Guernsey** Marissa Haddad Abby Hanson Michelle Hennessey

Joy Hood Brian Hoover Joy Horton Shelley Houser Sara Jannott Jana Joham George Karacsonvi Juli Karacsonyi Boris Keppler Kery Kilgannon Laura King Erin Kleinman Reini Knorr Carolyn Knott Eric Kurzenberger Joanne Lacrete Gail Lacugna Marc Lefebvre Bridget Lesizza Kelly Lovegrove Jen Lubarsky James Lugo Kristen Lundbye Robert Mackenzie Ethan Mangano Sarah Marshall Rvann McCabe Eileen McCormack David McKinnis Kelly McWhinnie Mary Jane Miller Kim Monahan Mindy Morgan Linda Murphy

Nick Novia Nicole Nuttall Clayton Nyiri Magda Nyiri Alison O'Connor Dvlan O'Connor Melissa O'Donnell Jen O'Hara Joanne Pagnello-Fremont Kylie Palladino Jamie Palmentiero Colleen Palmer Kimberly Pasquale Kristen Perez Sarah Perkins Michelle Phelan Tony Phillips Paul Piorek Marybeth Pirrie Terri Pisseri Daniel Pollack Janice Price Kelly Randolph Jeannine Raymond Elaine Remley Christina Rescsanski Alex Ressi Vanessa Rose Carrie Rullo Helene Salerno Andrew Shavinsky Lynn Shavinsky Jocelyn Shaw

Jenn Sherriff Leigh Smith Kim Sola Torey Strauser Kris Sullivan Subha Sunder Charlotte Talbot Rosario Tomas-Piza Janet Valiante Natalie Van Dalen Adrianna Viggiano Nikki Vinoski Barry Wade Victoria Wagenbach Cassie Walker Danielle Walker Andrew Walsh Andrea Ward Matt Webber **Bridget White** Kristen Willett Anna Woelk Heather Woelk Alexander Woitkowiak Amy Yann Eric Young Karen Young Heather Ziac





## **BOARD OF** DIRECTORS

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Lynn Shavinsky Jon Dilley

Vice President

Carrie Rullo

**Treasurer** 

Mindy Powlishen

#### **Recording Secretary**

Kiersten Chou

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#### ADVISORS TO THE BOARD

Lincoln W. Craighead, Engineering

Brian Fagan, Education

MRWC and River-Lab Program Founder/Author/Illustrator

Jocelyn T. (Joy) Shaw

Office Manager

Roberta C. Clark

## **PROGRAM** OFFICERS

#### RIVER-LAB OFFICERS

#### Advisor

Nicole Nuttall

#### **Directors**

Dabney Bowen: RL Estuary Nancy Fuller: Scheduler Alison Genovese: Curriculum Sara Jannott: RL Ecosystem Sarah Neafsey: RL Erosion

Nikki Vinoski: Co-Director of Curriculum

#### Gear Manager

Heidi Gassel

#### **Assistant Gear Manager**

Samantha Anderson

### 2020 FINANCIAL REPORT

Mill River Wetland Committee, Inc January 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020



INCOME	12/31/2020	12/31/2019
Donations		
General/Memorial	10,265.00	16,383.00
Annual appeal	5,825.00	6,825.00
Company Match	50.00	650.00
PTA donations	8,000.00	7,000.00
Subtotal Donations	24,140.00	30,858.00
River-Lab Program Income	8,260.00	12,460.00
Fundraising Income		
Special Events	2,335.00	0.00
Amazon Smile	167.97	129.73
Merchandise/Other	0.00	100.00
Social Media	605.00	600.00
Subtotal Fundraising	3,107.97	829.73
Grants	11,100.00	500.00
Dividend/Interest Income	5,062.16	2,174.20
TOTAL INCOME	51,670.13	46,821.93
EXPENSES		
MRWC Expenses		
Operating Expenses	4,270.79	4,301.93
Insurance	4,473.60	2,686.80
Storage	3,023.00	3,023.00
Scholarship Fund	250.00	500.00
Community Outreach	0.00	477.23
Subtotal MRWC Expenses	12,017.39	10,988.96
River-Lab Program Expenses	755.99	6,792.23
Payroll Expenses	7,898.91	23,177.55
Fundraising Expenses	750.56	116.89
Total Expenses	21,422.85	41,075.63
NET CASH FLOW	30,247.28	5,746.30
INVESTMENTS		
Vanguard Inter-Term Treasury Funds	45,834.71	42,358.77
Vanguard Inter-Term Treasury Funds*	30,803.35	27,467.28
Vanguard Short-Term Treasury Funds*	24,776.20	23,832.90
TOTAL INVESTMENTS	101,414.26	93,658.95

<sup>\*</sup>These restricted investments are funds from HUD for the dam restoration.





Mill River Wetland Committee, Inc. is a locally founded non-profit organization. We believe the most powerful protection for our environment comes through education. The River-Lab Environmental Science Program is our signature curriculum, through which school children visit a local river to learn about the importance of watersheds and how to protect them. In addition, MRWC is proud to engage our community in environmental issues and advocate for continued watershed protection.

#### Mill River Wetland Committee, Inc.

203.259.1847 P.O. Box 38 Fairfield, CT 06824

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