

## Overview: Big River Management Area

In 1964, the State of Rhode Island, via a bond mechanism, obtained approximately 8,400 acres of land in central Rhode Island in the Big River watershed, to develop a water supply reservoir. By the early 90's, the reservoir plan was shelved, and the legislature took action to prohibit development while allowing open space uses until the area was needed for water supply (RI Gen. Laws § 37-20-1). Though not slated for immediate development of a drinking water reservoir, the area remains an invaluable water resource as a future drinking water source.

The Big River Management Area (BRMA) is administered by the Water Resources Board (WRB) in partnership with the Division of Capital Asset Management & Maintenance (DCAMM), and the RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) consistent with statute (R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 37-20-1, 45-36-1(1) through (7), 46-15.1-19.1, 20-1-8 and R.I. Gen. Laws Chapter 42-17.1) and regulations (490-RICR-00-00-5) adopted pursuant to statute. There are active leases in effect that allow the continuation of uses that existed at the time of the condemnation. They include five (5) single family residences, a nursery school, a 79-pad mobile home park, and a nine-hole golf course. Several active recreational uses in Coventry (softball, baseball, soccer, aeromodelers) were allowed in the past. These types of active recreational uses are not allowed in the current regulations.

## Governing Statutes Related to Big River Management Area

- **§46-15.1-19.1 - Big River Reservoir lands administration responsibility**

*The Rhode Island water resources board, established pursuant to this chapter and chapter 15 of this title, shall be the only designated agency which will administer those lands acquired for the Big River Reservoir as established under section 23 of chapter 133 of the Public Laws of 1964. The director of the department of environmental management and the director's authorized agents, employees, and designees shall, together with the water resources board in accordance with the Big River management area land use plan for the lands, protect the natural resources of the Big River Reservoir lands. The lands of the Big River Reservoir are subject to enforcement authority of the department of environmental management, as provided for in chapter 17.1 of title 42, and as provided for in title 20 of the General Laws.*

- **§37-20-1 - Big River Reservoir – Development prohibited.**

*(a) All land acquired by the state or any subdivision thereof for the development of the "Big River Reservoir" so-called, including any land acquired by the Big River – Wood River Reservoir Site Acquisition Act, P.L. 1964, ch. 133, shall not be sold nor shall the land be developed in any way. The state shall not allow any future development or continued development on that property, and the property shall be designated "open space" as defined in § 45-36-1(1) – (7).*

*Provided, however, that the foregoing shall not be construed to prohibit the use of the said property as a water reservoir, or for the development of wells and well sites together with any infrastructure necessary for the treatment, transmission, storage and*

distribution of drinking water if the water resources board determines that exploration or development of groundwater is appropriate, then it shall not require legislative action to remove the property from the "open space" for the purposes of groundwater development as defined in § 45-36-1(1) – (8).

(b) Non-motorized bicycles are permitted upon and along land designated as the "Big River Management Area". The water resources board, in consultation with the department of environmental management shall within thirty (30) days of the passage of this act adopt rules and regulations that include but are not limited to the appropriate designated areas and defined hours for said uses in the management area.

- **§ 46-15.1-5. Powers.**

(a) The board shall carry out its functions and shall have the following powers:

(24) To enter into contracts and/or agreements with such departments, divisions, agencies, or boards of the state as are directed by the governor to regulate, manage, or perform related functions on any lands or waters acquired under the provisions of the Big River – Wood River Reservoir Site Acquisition Act (P.L. of 1964, chapter 133);

- **P.L. 1964, Chapter 133 - "Big river-Wood river reservoir site acquisition act."**

*AN ACT to Provide for the Authority to Issue Bonds and Notes to Finance the Acquisition of Sites for Reservoirs for Public Water Supply of the State, and in Amendment of and in Addition to Chapter 46-15 of the General Laws, Entitled "Water Resources Coordinating Board."*

- **490-RICR-00-00-5 - Big River Management Area Regulations**