



The city's groundwater levels seem to have held steady following last year's record rainfalls, with the many wooden pilings supporting buildings protected from deterioration by vigilant repairs and expanded conservation zones.

Running through an extensive underground network of water systems and channels, Boston's groundwater serves the vital role of preserving wooden struts that prop up buildings throughout the city.

Extended droughts or localized leaks can expose the pilings to air and cause them to rot. That threat has created a body of public and private individuals dedicated to monitoring and maintaining groundwater levels.

That job was easier last year, when the city's water tables were buoyed by the most precipitation in 20 years according to data from the Boston Groundwater Trust.

Officials and concerned members of the public have apparently maintained that momentum through the winter and are now looking to further shore up Boston's infrastructure.

"Things are looking pretty steady so far," said Christian Simonelli, executive director of the Trust. "The main drivers are what we get for rainfall and how many leaks we can plug. Of the roughly 800 wells we monitor, most were in their normal range. Historically, the springtime is good for water levels as the ground thaws and rains return."

The Trust's most recent dataset, gathered across the months of January and February, shows most of the wells sampled at healthy levels. There are still several outliers the Trust is looking into. Having been reported to the government, it now falls to city and state officials to locate exactly what is causing low levels in those areas.

"There are a couple areas that have mystified us a bit. There's a section in the Back Bay along Beacon Street where water levels move around a bit and are overall lower than we'd like. There's another on Mount Vernon Street. We alert city and state agencies and they go out and take a look, although they haven't found anything yet," said Simonelli.

The robust health of the city's water tables can be attributed in part to an update to Boston's zoning code in June of last year, expanding the special groundwater conservation overlay district to new areas.

Buildings in those neighborhoods are now required to have water reclamation systems, reinforcing their groundwater infrastructure.

"The largest area affected was East Boston," said Simonelli. "We're really satisfied with how the changes turned out. We now have close to 900 groundwater recharge systems taking roof water and putting it into the ground instead of storm drains."

With Boston's pilings largely secure, the Trust is now looking forward. The organization plans to update its data collection and presentation system, revamping its online service to fold in several data maps into a single platform before the end of April.

The Trust is also organizing a public forum for mid- June, the first since the 2005 forum that predated the well network and conservation overlay district.

It's a chance for the public and city officials to see how the solutions proposed a decade and a half ago have panned out and map out the future direction of groundwater conservation efforts.

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