

The Press of Atlantic City

August 17, 2004

Marsh restoration pitched to public at West Cape May meeting

By RICHARD DEGENER Staff Writer, (609) 463-6711, [E-Mail <mailto:rdegener@pressofac.com>](mailto:rdegener@pressofac.com)

WEST CAPE MAY - A little bit of phragmites is a good thing. When they get out of control, chemicals and fire are needed to control them.

Eric Schrading, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service expert on the pesky marsh, stated the case on Monday afternoon as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began selling a phragmites eradication project to the public. Schrading was one of the many experts here at West Cape May Borough Hall to explain the project to the public at information sessions held in the afternoon and then again in the evening.

"I've always said a little bit of phragmites is a good thing. The problem is when it goes from a 50-foot buffer to 300 acres. Then you lose (biological) diversity," Schrading told a group assembled at his information booth.

The Wildlife Service supports the plan by the Army Corps to spray herbicides on the reeds at South Cape May Meadow in September, begin burning the dead stalks during the winter, and then plant beneficial marsh vegetation come springtime. The Nature Conservancy, Cape May Point State Park, the state Department of Environmental Protection and other groups also came out to support the project.

"It's a tough decision on our part. We've taken over 10 years to analyze the project. It's either support the project or watch the biodiversity go downhill. Phragmites have taken over," said Jay Laubengeyer, of The Nature Conservancy.

Others came to the meeting to oppose the use of herbicides in the project. Barbara Skinner of Cape May said the herbicides could drift off the site and nobody knows the long-term risks.

"We're totally against it. They could burn and then dig up the roots. There's not one group here today showing a different side, and that's a totally biased presentation," Skinner said.

The New Jersey Environmental Federation did not have an information booth but came to hand out information in opposition to the project due to the use of herbicides. Jane Nogaki said the spraying would have to be done for years to kill the marsh reeds.

"We don't think spraying is effective, and it exposes non-target wildlife to toxins, Nogaki said.

J. Bailey Smith, the project manager, said the current plan is to begin spraying the second week in September and try to treat 57 acres this year. Another 43 acres would be sprayed in September 2005, with some touch-up spraying next year of some places within the original 57 acres.

"We are going to try to do this in one or two years. We got all the technical experts together and a lot of studies to say this is the best way to do this," Smith said.

While Smith calls a similar project on the Delaware Bay in Salem and Cumberland counties "a success story," Nogaki said spraying of glyphosate-based herbicides in that area has taken place every year since 1996 and the reeds have still survived.

Mayor Robert Jackson said he got mixed reactions from the public. Some questioned aspects of the project, but Jackson said he supports the overall goal of restoring the marsh and rebuilding the South Cape May beaches that protect his borough from ocean flood waters. Jackson said the marsh had more diversity when he was a child.

"We use to get beach plums out there," he said.

Another concern is that the Army Corps would not restore the beaches if too much opposition kills the marsh restoration part of the project. This is apparently a legitimate concern. Bailey said the project was approved as an environmental restoration project first, with beach nourishment only as a secondary goal.

Local resident Vincent Pellegrino was one of the residents who left with mixed feelings.

"They answered my questions as far as burning, but I'm still upset about the use of glyphosates," Pellegrino said.

To e-mail Richard Degener at The Press:

[RDegener@pressofac.com <mailto:RDegener@pressofac.com>](mailto:RDegener@pressofac.com)