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Rally staged against spraying of marsh reeds

By BRIAN IANIERI Staff Writer, (609) 463-6713

LOWER TOWNSHIP - -Protesters - some wearing skeleton or butterfly masks - staged a rally Wednesday to oppose a herbicide treatment they say would kill more than just marsh reeds at South Cape May Meadows.

Environmental activist Ruth Fisher said that spraying phragmites would also kill milkweed plants, a food for the migratory monarch butterflies that frequent the area.

"If they don't have food, they won't survive, and they may be killed outright by the poison itself," Fisher said.

Others at the rally called for more public discussion on the glyphosate-based herbicide treatment, which is scheduled to begin as soon as next week.

Among the groups represented were Concerned Citizens of Cape May County, Citizens Association for the Protection of the Environment and Clean Ocean Action.

In the next two years, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans to spray almost 100 acres in the wetlands between Cape May and Cape May Point.

The Army Corps has said the treatment is safe and will not hurt wildlife or people. The state Division of Fish and Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nature Conservancy are among the groups that support the plan.

The spraying is intended to kill phragmites as part of a larger project to restore beaches and wetlands in the area. In the winter, the dead stalks will be burned, and beneficial marsh vegetation will be planted in the spring.

The rally was staged at Cape May Point State Park, with Cape May Lighthouse on one side and the ocean on the other. But the more eye-catching sight was the area underneath the park pavilion, which was lined with protest signs, masked people and various butterfly props.

Cape May resident James Paradee, who donned the skeleton mask, asked for more public discussion before spraying begins.

"These things take time. There should be no hurry to spray ... until we figure this stuff out," he said. Others said they want another solution.

Jack Riehl, who owns a summer house in Cape May, said, "If they're wrong and they screw it up, there's no going back."

Wednesday's rally filled the pavilion with a crowd of about 50 people and attracted print and broadcast media. The rally lasted about a half-hour.

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