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 Forecast »

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Donna Jenkins

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SOUTH JERSEY

Environmental groups oppose weed treatment

Thursday, September 2, 2004

Aerial spraying in Cape May Point called a 'very dangerous plan'

By WILLIAM H. SOKOLIC
 Courier-Post Staff
 CAPE MAY POINT

Most environmentalists agree phragmites australis has to go.

The invasive marsh weed took control of the Lower Cape May Meadows when a dune-breach sent salt water into the fresh water wetlands, killing resident plants.

The elimination of the weed is necessary to restore the dunes and the meadows. The Army Corps of Engineers has elected to eradicate the weeds by a combination of treatments that include aerial spraying of the herbicide, glyphosphate, beginning as early as Sept 8.

But a contingent of environmental groups oppose the chemical route, and Wednesday they held a rally at Cape May Point State Park to dramatize their concerns.

At issue is how to deal with the runaway weeds. Lower Cape May Meadows is a 1.3-mile-long, 350-acre area of undeveloped oceanfront land, including the Cape May Point State Park. The phragmites have invaded almost 100 acres.

"They're a dangerous nuisance," said Merv Brokke, a spokesman for the Army Corps office in Philadelphia.

Aerial spraying is needed to ensure coverage in areas unreachable by man or vehicle, he said. Men carrying backpacks of the chemical will spray closer to endangered wildlife and residential areas.

Spraying must be completed before the first frost. After application, the Army Corps will eliminate the dead vegetation through a controlled burning, setting the stage for replanting indigenous species.

"This is a very dangerous plan," said Ruth Fisher, a local environmental activist from Dennis Township, who organized the rally.

The city council in Cape May approved a resolution last month urging the Army Corps to abandon spraying in favor of mechanical means. The New Jersey Audubon Society criticized a lack of sufficient safeguards.

"Physical methods of control, such as digging up and repeated mowing, maybe more labor intensive but pose less risk to the environment," said Jane Nogaki, pesticide program coordinator for the South Jersey office of the New Jersey Environmental Federation in Marlton.

The concern is the herbicide will not only kill the phragmites, but other plants necessary for the migration of wildlife such as the monarch butterfly and hawks.

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Brainstorms	"The monarchs will likely avoid the area this fall because the wildflowers that provide the critical nectar that fuels their southward migration to Mexico will be destroyed," said Lincoln P. Brower, research professor of biology at Sweet Briar College.
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Gannett State Bureau	The fear includes drifting of the spray into areas not targeted, leaking into groundwater systems, Nogaki said.
InJersey.com	
Other Gannett papers	Residue levels were found in the urine of a farmer, his wife and children, she said.
USA Today	
Space.com	
The Wire (AP)	"We need a full public hearing explaining the project," said Jessie Weeks, of the Cape May City Environmental Commission.

The Army Corps held a public information session on Aug. 17, but no hearing is required by the state Department of Environmental Protection, which issued a permit for the spraying, which should take no longer than two hours.

"They bring up great points," Brokke concedes. "But this is a project we studied for 10 years. We looked at all possibilities, and determined this was the best method."

The Army Corps tested the same herbicide on a wildlife refuge in Tuckerton, Brokke said. Results proved effective, he said.

But Tony Totah of Clean Ocean Action said a similar program by PSE&G in Salem County failed to kill the phragmites. When they stopped spraying, the phragmites came back.

"It's not an issue at all that this presents a threat to public health," said Karen Hershey, a spokeswoman for the DEP. Glyphosphate is a common pesticide that breaks down easily with no potential for groundwater contamination, she said.

The Army Corps has taken precautions in planning the aerial assault. The agency won't spray if the wind speed exceeds 10 miles per hour, or if it blows anywhere but directly out to sea.

Moreover, the planes will be no more than 10 feet above the phragmites, releasing more controlled droplets instead of a mist.

The aerial spraying will stay clear of residential areas. The Army Corps is also required to notify the public before the spraying.

"If this is so safe, why did they send a notice to keep children home," said Barbara Matthews, of Cape May, protesting along with her sister, Nannette Simmers and a cousin, Mary Chapman. "We all have children in schools here," Simmers said.

WHERE TO CALL

- Anyone concerned about the project can call the state Department of Environmental Protection at (609) 530-4070.

Reach William H. Sokolic at (609) 823-9159 orwsokolic@courierpostonline.com

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