

Residents Question Saltwater Flow to Pond Creek



By JACK FICHTER
WEST CAPE MAY — A proposal by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to open freshwater Pond Creek Marsh to the flow of saltwater from Delaware Bay to eliminate phragmites received a cool reception from residents who spoke at an Oct. 13 public meeting.

The session was scheduled to be a PowerPoint presentation followed by a brief question and answer period and time to talk with project team members, individually, who were sitting on the side of the room.

An audience member requested the team of seven engineers take questions before the public, so everyone in the room could hear the information, and it would become part of public record.

The goal of the project was to restore Pond Creek Marsh to a salt marsh planted with spartina grass rather than phragmites, said Mark Eberle, project manager.

The marsh is located between the former magnesite factory and Higbees Beach, extending to Bayshore Road in West Cape May and Lower Township. A limited amount of saltwater enters the marsh from a channel and tide gate built in 1917.

Eberle said the corps looked at several alternatives for Pond Creek Marsh. He said it could be left in its current state, sprayed with herbicide to kill phragmites, or flooded with saltwater.

The current preferred plan calls for saltwater inflow of 170 acres of the 400-acre marsh.

A proposed water control structure measuring 17 feet high and 40 feet wide would be constructed on what is now a pile of very alkaline spoils from the magnesite plant.

The \$2.9 million project would fill in the current channel to the bay. The corps would construct a new 920-foot channel, 600 feet south of the current inlet to shorten the distance between the bay and marsh to increase tidal flow. The channel would be 20 feet deep.

A new jetty would be built to stabilize the inlet for the new channel, which would extend 154 feet into the bay.

Pierre Lacombe, a hydro geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, said there



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THE TEAM — Residents questioned experts from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and state DEP at a meeting concerning flooding Pond Creek Marsh with saltwater from Delaware Bay.

was very little chance that nearby privately owned wells would be impacted by saltwater intrusion from flooding the marsh. He said the Rea Farm and Hidden Valley Ranch were the only large volume users of water, south of the Cape May Canal.

Eberle said the saltwater would allow "natural mosquito control" of the marsh. Depending on funding availability, he said a goal was to complete design of the project by May 2006 with construction starting in early 2007.

Resident Jack Sayer said the \$2.9 million expenditure "was far beyond what was needed." He suggested three small diameter pipes, stacked vertically, draining into the bay to relieve any flooding of the marsh and maintain a freshwater environment.

"It's a bad idea to introduce saltwater into an area that it hasn't been in 100 years," commented resident Fred Long.

He said the project would disturb nearly 300,000 cubic yards of wetland material.

Resident Andrew Long said the Army Corps' report

underestimated the diversity of waterfowl species currently in the marsh. He expressed concern about plans to surround freshwater Davies Lake with a saltwater marsh.

An unidentified woman in the audience asked how the project could be stopped. She said the Army Corp's work at the Lower Cape May Meadows "looked like the Sahara Desert with two pools of water with green slime and no wildlife."

Lee Widjeskog, DEP regional superintendent of its Bureau of Land Management said political pressure could be applied by contacting Assemblymen Jeff Van Drew (D-1st) and Jack Gibson (R-1st) and Sen. Nicholas Asselta (R-1st).

Robert Jackson, former Mayor of West Cape, questioned a "grandiose" plan that does not address who is responsible for long term maintenance. He said there was "no real reason to fear phragmites."

The marsh "it great like it is," Jackson said.

Eberle said the public should listen to the opinion of experts who have degrees in ecology or biology.

Jackson asked if DEP was

exempt from the Freshwater Wetlands Act. Widjeskog said the project would require approval of DEP's land use regulation program.

Eberle said he expected an answer within two weeks.

Lance Williams, of Willow Creek Farm, asked what the Army Corps would do if his grape crop were ruined by saltwater intrusion. He also noted Pond Creek Marsh is filled with the Great Southern Tree Frog, an endangered species, a creature that does not live in saltwater.

Bob Moore, an Army Corps hydraulic engineer, said a transition zone between salt and fresh water would be created by building mud berms, 12 to 18 inches high and by adjusting the tide gate. He said if saltwater ruined wells, DEP would drill a new well for property owners or pay for hook up to municipal water.

LaCombe said wells would be monitored in the area.

Eberle said unless the community presents a compelling reason not to do the project, it would go forward.

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