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SHOULD MARSH SUFFER SEA CHANGE? PUBLIC TO HAVE SAY

By Richard Degener, (609) 463-6711

The public will get a chance to comment on a plan by federal and state governments to use Delaware Bay waters to kill phragmites marsh reeds in Pond Creek Meadow.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is proposing the \$2.9 million project with the state Department of Environmental Protection as its partner, has set up two public sessions Oct. 13 in West Cape May Borough Hall. The meetings will begin with an overview of a project that would use tidal waters to kill the nuisance marsh reed that has taken over the meadow. Phragmites cannot live in pure saltwater, and the goal is to kill about 270 acres of them and convert the marsh into an estuarine system dominated by native cordgrasses.

After the overview, there will be public comments with individuals allowed three minutes to speak. At the end of each session, questions will be answered. Any questions that can't be answered Oct. 13 will likely be addressed later in writing, said Army Corps spokesman Merv Brokke.

The project calls for construction of a 920-foot channel, 20 feet wide and 6 feet deep, which connects the Delaware Bay with the marsh. A new water-control structure would regulate tidal flow. Two miles of ditches dug in the marsh would move the saltwater around to kill the phragmites. Plans also call for a new rock jetty extending into the bay.

The inlet would be created where one originally existed. The project will follow an 1888 map showing where bay waters entered the marsh before the Cape May County Mosquito Commission in 1917 blocked the tidal waters to combat saltmarsh mosquitoes. In recent years, saltwater has started coming into the marsh on its own, and this has already started to kill the phragmites.

"Nature is starting to do what we want to do. Opening up the canal will speed nature along, and also we want to control it and not let it go," Brokke said.

While some are worried about sending saltwater into the marsh, the proposal is supposed to control it with a water-control structure built to withstand a 500-year Delaware Bay storm. Such a storm would bring in a 9.3-foot wall of water. The water-control structure could hold back a flood height of 10.6 feet. Some are skeptical.

"The 500-year flooding event will raise water in the bay and help to send it in all directions at once, bypassing the control structure," argues Al Nicholson, a Cumberland County birdwatcher who uses the marsh.

Nicholson, in a letter to the Army Corps, has raised several questions about the project. He said the project could create "expensive if not impossible" maintenance problems as sand drifts across the inlet.

Nicholson also wants to save the freshwater wetlands created since the marsh was closed to the tides.

"1888 was then, but this is now, and circumstances could not be more different," Nicholson said.

South Dennis environmentalist Ruth Fisher has raised questions about the impact on archaeological sites in the meadow and diamondback terrapin turtles. She is also concerned the marshland conversion will lead to more hunting.

"Goals need to be clear. How this manipulation might harm what has established there needs to be addressed," Fisher said.

The Army Corps is touting many benefits including reducing the fire threat, since phragmites are highly flammable, and reducing pesticide spraying, since the reeds breed mosquitoes. The plan would also create habitat for more birds and fish while opening the marsh to recreational uses including birding, fishing, hunting and environmental studies.

Brokke said it is just a proposal at this point, and the public should be aware there are a number of alternatives. He said the Army Corps has already received about 30 letters, and the meeting was set up after talking to local officials. West Cape May Mayor Pam Kaithern pushed for the public meeting.

"There are some concerns. The potential for flooding, saltwater intrusion (of aquifers), and the overall affect on habitat are the three areas that received the most questions," Brokke said.

The public comment period was supposed to expire July 30, but Brokke said it has been extended to Nov. 14.

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