

New front in Army Corps' phrag fight

\$2M marsh project set for bay beach

The Jersey Cape has become a battle ground, pitting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers against phragmites.

The latest battle looming will take place in the Higbee Beach wildlife management area, where the corps will try to use salt water against the tall, tough reed instead of herbicides and fire.

The battleground will be the Pond Creek marsh, a 417-acre area within the wildlife management area. The corps proposes cutting a new channel to allow salt water to flow more easily into the marsh, which officials say will bring it closer to its natural condition.

About a third of the way from the end of Sunset Boulevard to the beach path at the Higbee Beach parking area, a tidal stream leads out between the dunes. Inside the dunes is a wide, mucky plain dominated by the tall phragmites, which federal naturalists say offers little to native and migrating animals in terms of food or habitat.

An ongoing project at the Cape May Point State Park and the nearby Nature Center lands to clear out the reed has proved controversial because of the use of herbicide and plans to burn out the reed. But in the Pond Creek proposal, the Army Corps plans to use salt water to drive out the plant.

If the Army Corps doesn't do something, the entire area will be a monoculture, according to Merve Brokke, a spokesman for the Philadelphia district of the Army Corps.

The overall cost is estimated at \$2 million. For now, there is about \$30,000 in the federal budget for the work, but the plans are not yet completed, Brokke said. The state Department of Environmental Protection is also sponsoring the work.

A public notice of the project contends that the improved tidal flow will also greatly improve flood protecting for neighboring properties. According to Brokke,

the work will also make things better for bird watching, hunting and fishing.

As it stands, the site is not particularly inviting. The mud is deep and stinky, ticks abound, and pushing through the stand of phragmites reveals more phragmites.

Old maps show the tidal creek migrating from one spot to another between the dunes over the decades. The area is almost entirely fresh water, which the corps says is because of a tidal gate installed in 1917.

That gate will become part of a new dune, and a new, shorter channel cut through a little south of there.

According to Brokke, the corps will work to avoid salt-water contamination of Davies Lake, a freshwater lake right next to the marsh, nestled among the dunes of Higbee. Some of the sand removed to create the channel will be used to shore up the banks of the lake to separate the fresh and salt waters.

The project area remains mostly wild, bordered by beach and sand dunes, although there are a few residences and farms touching part of the marsh. Several owners have expressed concern about salt water intrusion into wells, including some used for agricultural purposes such as watering horses.

"This is very important to us," said Brokke, who said the Army Corps would monitor the wells during and after the project.

The proposal also calls for a channel to be dredged into the Delaware Bay.

More information is available at www.nap.uaace.army.mil, or those interested in comment may do so in writing directly to the Army Corps at: Minas M> Arabatzis, environmental resource branch, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wanamaker Building, 100 Penn Square East, Philadelphia, Pa., 19107-3390.

— Bill Barlow