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Restoring Marsh Is Muck Work

Wetlands Project Begins In Fenwick

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OLD SAYBROOK -- The view from the front deck of Bill Webster's Fenwick home includes the lighthouse at the tip of the breakwater dividing Long Island Sound from the Connecticut River.

Webster's back deck overlooks a swatch of lawn and the swaying marsh grasses beyond, with the roof and chimneys of Katharine Hepburn's home visible just to the west.

Those marsh grasses, however, are phragmite, and while pretty, they can be environmentally disastrous. Phragmite forms a thick blanket that chokes native vegetation, blocks the flow of water and prevents birds and fish from feeding.

In this marsh, however, the phragmite's days are numbered. On Friday, a large group of representatives from environmental organizations gathered on Webster's back lawn to applaud the payloaders and other heavy equipment lifting big globs of muck and phragmite from the nearby marsh.

"It's music to my ears," said Art Rocque, state Department of Environmental Protection commissioner.

Also on hand were other DEP officials and representatives from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Long Island Sound Office, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Restoration Center, Ducks Unlimited, the Lynde Point Land Trust Marsh Restoration Committee, the Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership and Northeast Utilities.

The partnership was put together by DEP to get corporations such as Northeast Utilities and governmental agencies to share the costs and sometimes the expertise in wetland restoration projects in the state.

Under the DEP's direction, \$250,000 was collected from federal, state and local funds and donations from Northeast Utilities and the Lynde Point Land Trust. The money is being used to dig out the phragmite and the dredged material that for 70 years has filled 10 acres behind Webster's house.

Webster, whose summer home was built by his grandfather and who is an active member of the restoration committee, said his mother talked of boating in the pond that once dominated those 10 acres owned by the Borough of Fenwick.

Called the Lynde Point Marsh, the area was destroyed in the 1930s and '40s when dredged material from the nearby federal navigation channel was dumped in the wetland, filling in the pond and the streams that flowed into it.

The phragmite took over. The ducks, fish, birds and native plants disappeared.

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The borough's Lynde Point Land Trust contacted the state when it realized there was work underway in other nearby wetlands to remove phragmite.

Ron Rozsa, the coastal ecologist with the DEP's Long Island Sound programs, helped the borough to restore the damage from decades ago, convincing Fenwick residents that 40,000 cubic yards of excavated muck would not be as unsightly as they might believe when spread out near the restoration area.

The berm the material will create will be about 3 feet high and planted with native grasses. The dredged 10 acres will feature seven small ponds, small channels and true wetlands.

Rozsa and other environmentalists watching the work Friday talked of the fish - killifish, mummichog, grass shrimp and silver sides - that should return once there is free-flowing water.

Black ducks, egrets and shore birds such as the willet and yellow leg will return, and this area at the mouth of the Connecticut River will attract the migratory birds that fled when their habitat was filled, Rozsa and others said.

Black grass, narrow leaf cattails, the showy rose mallow and chairmaker's rush should grow again. And then, Bill Webster will have a view similar to what his mother saw as a child.

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