

FISHERS ISLAND GAZETTE

December 2004

Phragmites. Just the name conjures intense feelings of frustration on Fishers Island. The 12-foot-high reeds, which grow an inch apart, are choking the Island's tidal marshes, leaving no room for ducks, herons and egrets to land, and swallowing clusters of pink marsh mallow flowers along the way.

Summer resident Geb Cook, representing the Fishers Island Conservancy, is trying to lay the groundwork for a pilot program to fight phragmites on the Island, beginning with former Conservancy President Cherry Rafferty's property, which includes two acres of tidal marsh currently overrun by phragmites.

Mr. Cook was initially encouraged by a successful watershed restoration program along the Connecticut River, which calls for spraying the invasive reed with Rodeo, an aquatic version of the weed-killer Round-up, and then clearing the dead vegetation.

"Unfortunately, the New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is sending out mixed messages," Mr. Cook said. "We want to follow DEC regulations to the letter, but I am confused about what they are."

While collecting his permit applications, Mr. Cook was told by a DEC representative that after submitting a plot plan and waiting for a visit from the DEC, the Conservancy might gain permission to cut down the phragmites, but no permits for herbicide applications are granted by the DEC.

This information directly contradicts the DEC-required removal of phragmites near the Fishers Island Club's (FIC) 15th tee. The DEC's requirement was part of the permitting process the club followed when it applied for approval to raise the flooded 13th fairway, according to Donald Beck, FIC golf course superintendent.

"To help reduce the possibility of the phragmites re-establishing themselves, we plan to run a pipe under the narrow neck of the 14th hole to permit salt water to flow into the phragmites area, which was originally a salt water marsh. Phragmites are an indication of fresh water. This will bring the marsh back to its original state."

Even if Mr. Cook eventually gains the approval he hopes for, some members of the Conservancy are vehemently opposed to using any herbicide. "The Conservancy has concerns about herbicide application and is working to understand the ramifications," Mr. Cook said.

"Mowing, with no application of herbicide, won't stop the growth of these invasives, but it's a beginning. We want residents to see this marsh without the phragmites. Perhaps there will be a popular move to fight phragmites throughout the Island. Just as important, we want the DEC to recognize that this is a problem on Fishers Island and tell us what we can do about it and how we can do it."

If Connecticut's statistics relate at all to Fishers Island, the numbers are sobering. According to a Sept. 2003 article in *Yankee Magazine*: "Unchecked, [Connecticut] could lose more than 200 acres of its area to phragmites every year. In another 50 years, if no steps are taken to control phragmites' spread, all of Connecticut's 17,608 acres of tidal marsh could be gone."

Spray the rodeo while the reeds are standing. They ingest the herbicide to the roots, which go 2-3 feet into the ground, and then mow it down.

The name phragmites comes from the Greek phragma, meaning "fence."