



# Partnership targets invasive grass smothering Connecticut River marsh



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David Sagan, a private land biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, uses a Marsh Master to mow down Phragmites in the Lord's Cove area of Lyme on Wednesday, March 8, 2017. Sagan's work is part of a partnership project between the Fish & Wildlife Service, the Nature Conservancy, the Connecticut River Gateway Commission, the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and various private landowners to clear the invasive plant from about 200 acres of marshland along the Connecticut River. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

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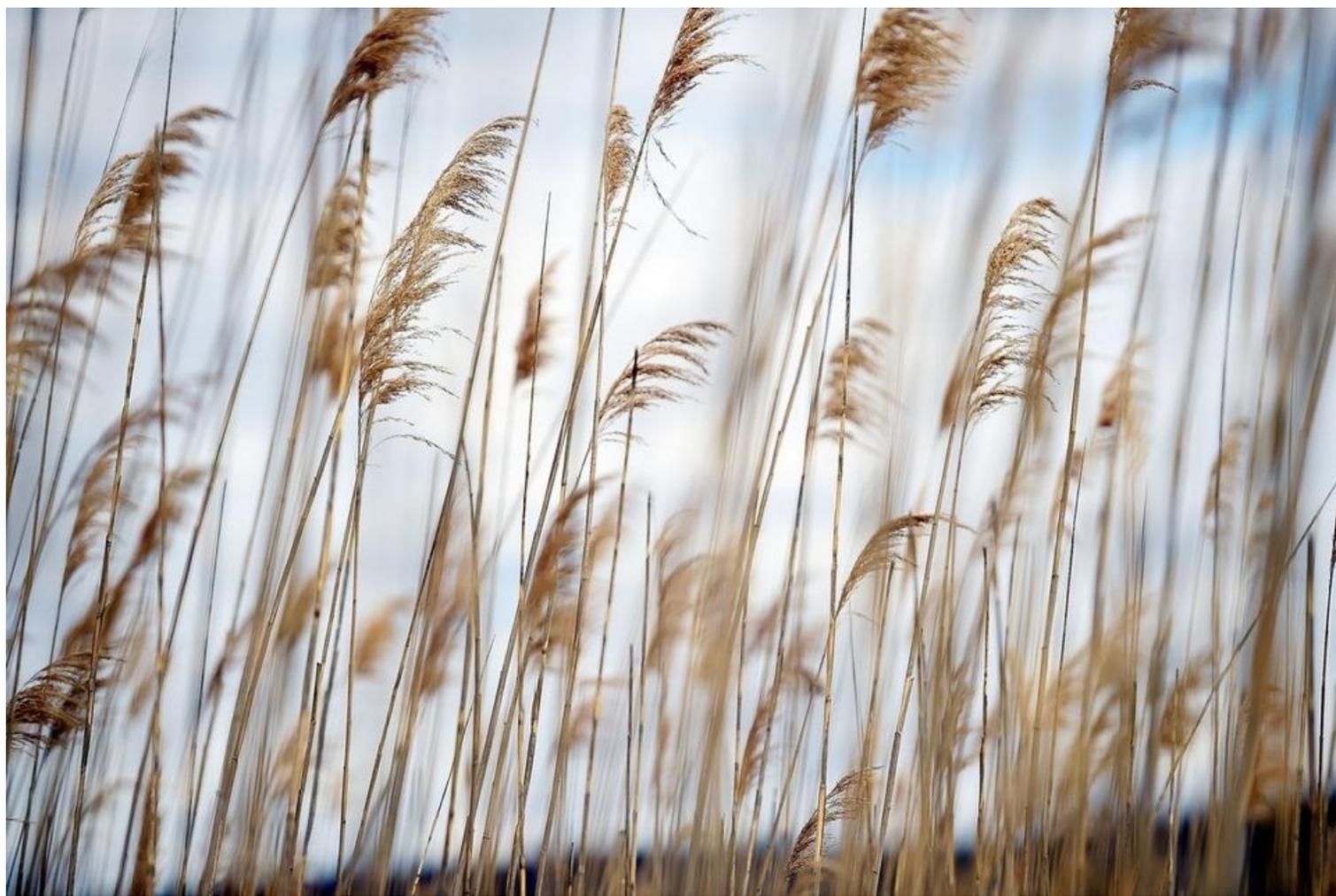
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Lyme — David Sagan has been getting plenty of practice for the start of grass-cutting season in a couple of months.

“Back and forth, just like mowing the lawn,” he said Wednesday, as he jumped out of the driver’s seat of the Marsh Master machine he was steering across the mud at the Lord’s Creek wetland on the Connecticut River, its rear roller chopper chewing six-foot swaths through the jungle of tall, brittle stalks.

The grass that Sagan, private lands biologist for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish & Wildlife Refuge, has been felling since last week isn’t the ankle-deep green blades of backyards and soccer fields, but tasseled beige reeds that reach over his head and dominate this part of the landscape along the lower river. Invasive phragmites from Europe has overtaken about 247 of the roughly 400 acres in Lord’s Cove, crowding out native plants that birds, turtles, frogs and other wildlife depend on.

“The habitat value of phragmites is very poor,” said Roger Wolfe, mosquito management coordinator in the Natural Resources Division of the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. But if native plants are allowed to return, more of the bald eagles, northern harriers, ospreys, and the various waterfowl and migratory bird species the lower river is known for would find their way to Lord’s Cove, he said.



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Phragmites seed heads blow in the breeze as David Sagan, a private land biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, uses a Marsh Master to mow down phragmites in the Lord's Cove area of Lyme on Wednesday, March 8, 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Now, a group of governmental and private organizations and private landowners is working to turn the monoculture of phragmites back into a healthy marsh of native plants, including cattails, sedge grasses, hibiscus, switchgrass, bayberry and saltmeadow cordgrass.

A patchwork quilt of partners came together for the project. They include the Fish & Wildlife Service, which has designated the entire Connecticut River watershed as the Conte refuge, along with DEEP, which owns the Lord's Meadow and nearby Nott Island wildlife management areas, plus the Nature Conservancy, the Potapaug Gun Club and the Town of Lyme, all of which own portions of the marsh. The Connecticut River Gateway Commission and several residents with property on the marsh, coordinated by the Lyme Land Conservation Trust, also have joined in.



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David Sagan, a private land biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and volunteer Laurie Snarski, use a Marsh Master to mow down phragmites in the Lord's Cove area of Lyme on Wednesday, March 8, 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

One of the private owners is Richard Snarski, a wetlands scientist volunteering his time to bring the partners together and oversee the project. "These are wetlands of international importance," he said, referring to the Ramsar Convention's designation of the Connecticut River estuary in 1994.

Snarski said that, based on historical photos he's examined, he believes the phragmites first appeared on the lower river in the 1960s. About 15 years ago, a similar coalition of groups came together to get rid of it, but phragmites is persistent.

"This time, the coalition will stay on it," he said. "This time, we'll get it down to a control level, and then come back every year and do a couple of acres."

The project is being paid for with a \$30,000 grant from the gateway commission, \$16,000 from the conservancy and \$18,000 from private landowners.

For the first phase of the project, the Fish & Wildlife Service has dispatched Sagan and the Marsh Master machine to cut back last year's growth of phragmites. So far, he's leveled about 50 acres, and expects to be finished by the end of next week. Part of the project will take him to some offshore islands in the marsh, requiring him to float the amphibious Marsh Master across the channel by boat.

"Phragmites suppresses the growth of the native vegetation," Sagan said. "The Marsh Master scratches up the surface just enough to expose the historic seed banks of the native plants. This spring, I bet you'll see some of the native vegetation start to come through."

For the second phase, a contractor will be hired to spray new phragmites growth with Imazapyr, a chemical herbicide. Cutting the old growth first, Sagan said, means less herbicide can be applied to be effective.

"It's a very controlled spraying," Snarski said. "We'll use a machine with a power sprayer on the back, and some hand application."

Snarski said additional funds are being sought to keep the work going into the future. Donors should indicate contributions are for the Phragmites Eradication Project and send them to Lyme Land Conservation Trust; P.O. Box 1002; Old Lyme, CT 06371.

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