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Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

DNR wildlife biologist Ernier Kafcas crosses a shallow canal after evaluating the DNR phragmite research plot with his Labrador, Ali. The plot was treated with two herbicides, Eagre and Arsenal, to see if they're effective against the weed.

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ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment

Ecologists battle invasive marsh weed

Noxious vegetation threatens waterfowl habitat

By Gene Schabath / *The Detroit News*

FAIR HAVEN -- Like tan and gold feather dusters, the bamboo-like plants sway in the autumn breeze at the sprawling St. John Marsh, waving to motorists along M-29.

But for David Brakhage, the 12-foot phragmites are anything but stately or attractive.

The noxious, invasive weeds choke out other vegetation in wetlands, including cattails, bullrushes and sedges -- plants that provide food and habitat for waterfowl necessary for the multimillion-dollar duck hunting industry that depends on wetlands.

At the 3,000-acre St. John Marsh near Fair Haven in St. Clair County, phragmites are not only a menace to local aquatic plant life, they also pose a serious threat to duck hunting at the marsh and nearby Lake St. Clair.

"Potentially, it could end duck hunting there in the St. John Marsh," said Brakhage, regional biological supervisor for the Great Lakes Area



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Phragmite weeds blow in the wind flanked by the Colony Tower Lighthouse in St. John Marsh in Pearl Beach. The weeds threaten the wetlands.

Wetlands decline

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of Ducks Unlimited. Ducks Unlimited is a national conservation organization.

"As the habitat is degraded by the phragmites, the marsh can't support the number and diversity of waterfowl and other wildlife," said Brakhage of Ann Arbor.

Wetlands -- found in every state -- filter out pollutants, preventing them from entering rivers, lakes and streams that provide drinking water. They also provide natural flood control by absorbing excess water, and protect coastal areas from erosion.

Wetlands, which are threatened by everything from the expansion of farm land to suburban sprawl, also provide habitat for more than 40 percent of the nation's endangered and threatened wildlife and are prime spots for fishing, hunting and bird-watching.

St. John Marsh is regarded by biologists as one of the most productive wetlands of its kind in southeast Michigan. But it's not the only wetland in the state or country where phragmites have taken root.

The plants also can be seen along roadside ditches throughout Metro Detroit and in marshy areas at Stony Creek Metropark in Shelby Township and Metro Beach Metropark in Harrison Township, and nearly any wetland in southeast Michigan.

Ducks Unlimited and several other state conservation groups have teamed with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in a research program at St. John Marsh. The purpose of the program is to eradicate or, at least, control the phragmites.

The plants have taken over about 100,000 acres of wetland in Michigan. The weed marches, uncontrolled, from marsh to marsh and from one roadside ditch to another, said Kurt Getsinger, a research biologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Mississippi.

Phragmites are spreading across the northern states and there are already large infestations around New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Michigan and other parts of the Great Lakes, said Getsinger, who is heading the St. John experiment.

"St. John Marsh is being overrun by phragmites and if we don't do anything soon we will lose the marsh to phragmites," he said.

Getsinger said the phragmites scourge can disrupt the food web by destroying food-bearing native plants. That can pare back on the number of fur bearing animals, insects, butterflies, nonmigratory songbirds, reptiles, amphibians and other wildlife that inhabit wetlands.

On the heels of the environmental damage also exists the chance of severe economic loss if waterfowl are chased from wetlands, Brakhage said.

A study by Ducks Unlimited shows that waterfowl hunters bring in \$94 million annual in hunting migratory birds. "And the economic impact from nonhunting activities of migratory birds, such as bird-watching, is \$512 million a year in Michigan," Brakhage said.

That's why the current all-out war is being waged against phragmites at St. John Marsh.

St. John Marsh is 60 miles northeast of Detroit. The natural area nearly is directly

Service, Michigan once was 30-percent wetlands, with 11.1 million acres. The agency estimated that 5.6 million acres remained in the 1980s.



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across Anchor Bay from Metro Beach Metropark in Harrison Township.

Getsinger's work centers on 36 plots of land about one-tenth of an acre each. The plots are glutted with phragmites and were treated in August with two herbicides -- Eagre and Arsenal.

The herbicides, along with beetles, have been used to control another invasive weed, purple loosestrife. Scientists hope the chemicals will help curtail phragmites, too, Getsinger said.

Researchers also plan this winter to conduct controlled burns on half of the 36 plots of land at the marsh to get rid of the phragmites.

"This plant is difficult to control and it may take a combination of these things," Getsinger said. "The primary goal is to control the phragmites, but minimize the damage to other plants.

A third stage of the campaign could be to introduce herbivore beetles, such as *Galerucella*, into the marsh to eat the roots of the phragmites, said Ernie Kafcas, a biologist with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources's Great Lakes Research Station at the mouth of the Clinton River in Harrison Township.

Galerucellas have been credited with wiping out large stands of the purple loosestrife in southern Michigan.

"We're hoping to integrate the beetles with other research so that it's more than just chemical control," Kafcas said. "We hope to come up with some sort of method where we don't have to come back and treat it again."

The St. John Marsh experiment is being conducted in conjunction with a similar study in the 1,200-acre marsh at Algonac State Park five miles to the east where phragmites also have established a stronghold.

Getsinger said phragmites have been in Michigan and other states for centuries, but there is evidence the weed has hybridized with an aggressive species from Australia. Scientists believe the Australian phragmite was brought to the United States as an ornamental plant and eventually cross-pollinated with local phragmites.

Scientists differ as to why phragmites have suddenly raged out of control.

Getsinger said low water levels in the Great Lakes over the past few years could partly be to blame.

"During low water periods the native wetland species decline, however, phragmites have the ability to become established in that situation -- quickly expanding its range," Getsinger said.

"They are taking advantage of the low lake levels and going into new areas, crowding out other vegetation, and that's not good."

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