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State weeding out invasive species

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Lansing Bureau

ALGONAC -- Acre on acre, the dead, gray stems of a foreign weed stand head-high in what once was a lush wetland in St. John's Marsh, just inland from Lake St. Clair.

The plants, called phragmites, have been crowding out native greenery in the popular wildlife area for more than a decade. State biologists are fighting back with a combination of herbicides, fire, giant mowers and water-level controls.

Contractors for the state Department of Natural Resources used a helicopter to spray 170 acres of thick phragmites in the marsh a year ago. The state expects to burn the area this month to destroy the dry stalks and any young plants that may be sprouting from the roots.

"When the phragmites get so thick, there really isn't a whole lot under there to worry about killing," said Kurt Getsinger, an invasive species researcher with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

St. John's Marsh is just one among dozens of sites where state agencies and nonprofit groups such as The Nature Conservancy are working to root out invasive weeds and replace them with plants native to Michigan.

In a process that began with voter-approved funding in the mid-1990s, state biologists are gradually restoring hundreds of native plant species in places like Algonac, Sterling and Grand Mere state parks, the Fort Custer Recreation Area, Bay City's Tobico Marsh and the Brighton Recreation Area.

Restoration projects and related research have gained speed in recent years, thanks to a series of grants from government and nonprofit agencies, with hunters and conservation groups providing matching funds.

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One budding success is the six-acre Blazing Star Prairie, inside Algonac State park, where some 200 species of plants provide a hint of the colors and shapes that once covered 150,000 acres of lake-plain prairies in Michigan.

The purple spikes of the blazing star plants that give the site its name finished blooming in August. In early September, the prairie is filled with flowers of ironweed, tall coreopsis, tall sunflowers, native thistles and rare Sullivant's milkweed.

"From early spring on, there's something blooming in there," said Ray Fahlsing, who manages native species restoration programs for the DNR's Parks Division.

As part of the restoration effort, researchers are trying to slow the spread of tough weeds such as purple loosestrife, glossy buckthorn and phragmites, the tall, feathery plants that have displaced native reeds and cattails along parts of Lake Huron and Lake Erie.

Crews must take care they don't knock one invasive weed out of a site, only to clear the way for a worse problem, Fahlsing said.

That happened in some spots where researchers released a beetle to control stands of purple loosestrife, which thrives along streambanks and roadsides. The beetles did their job, but on some sites the loosestrife was simply replaced by phragmites, which is even more difficult to control.

Phragmites is a cause for considerable concern in Ontario and Eastern Michigan, as well as the Atlantic Coast. The plant sends out horizontal roots called rhizomes that can extend up to 70 feet and send up a new stalk every 10-12 inches.

It's tolerant of salt, which gives it an advantage in roadside ditches, and it survives fire by re-sprouting from the roots.

A native variety of the plant grows in much of the United States, including Michigan, without crowding out other species. Genetic studies show the plants invading Great Lakes shorelines are all of a single non-native genotype, Getsinger said.

Ernie Kafcas, a DNR wildlife habitat specialist, said disturbed land won't return to its natural state on its own. Even when balance has been restored, it's a never-ending job to keep out brush and invasive species, he said.

"If you did nothing here for even 10 years, it would brush right up," Kafcas said recently as he looked over the Blazing Star Prairie. "You've got to manage it and you've got to be knowledgeable."

Fahlsing relies on a "huge" volunteer effort to collect wild plant seeds for use in restoration programs. Volunteers will be harvesting seeds this year or next in such widely diverse landscapes as Fort Custer Recreation Area, Bay City's Tobico Marsh and the Brighton Recreation Area.

Lake plain prairies such as that in Algonac State Park are low-lying areas just inland from the Great Lakes, where the high water table discouraged growth of the forests that naturally covered much of Michigan.

Before European farmers arrived, native people regularly burned the prairies to keep them open for wildlife habitat and for gathering food and medicinal plants.

The small Blazing Star Prairie remnant was choked with non-native plants, shrubs and small trees when the state began managing it about seven years ago with periodic fire, mowing, application of pesticides and seeding of

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such native plants as big bluestem grass.

But even here, the plant community hasn't been completely restored.

Directly across the St. Clair River in Canada, Indians on Walpole Island are still managing prairies in the traditional way, with annual burning on land that was never cultivated for agriculture. There at least 300 native plant species continue to thrive.

"They have 100 more species than we have over here," Fahlsing said.

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