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Weed threatens Tobico, other marshes

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TIMES NEWS SERVICE

State biologists are fighting an invasive plant called phragmites with herbicides, fire, giant mowers and water-level controls.

The battlefield includes Tobico Marsh, part of the Bay City State Recreation Area in Bangor Township.

The tall, feathery plants have been displacing native greenery in St. John's Marsh, just inland from Lake St. Clair, for more than a decade.

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 the state is working to root out invasive weeds and replace them with plants native to Michigan.

Other targets are in places such as Tobico Marsh, Algonac, Sterling and Grand Mere state parks, the Fort Custer Recreation Area, 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.

One budding success is the six-acre Blazing Star Prairie, inside Algonac

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State Park, where nearly 200 species of plants once covered 150,000 acres of lake-plain prairies in Michigan.

Researchers are trying to slow the spread of tough weeds such as purple loosestrife, glossy buckthorn and phragmites along parts of Lake Huron and Lake Erie.

Crews must take care they do not knock one invasive weed out of a site, only to clear the way for a worse problem, said Ray Fahlsing, who manages native species restoration programs for the DNR's Parks Division.

Ernie Kafcas, a wildlife habitat specialist with the agency, said disturbed land will not return to its natural state on its own. Even when balance has been restored, he said it is a never-ending job to keep out brush and invasive species.

"If you did nothing here for even 10 years, it would brush right up," Kafcas said. "You've got to manage it, and you've got to be knowledgeable."

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

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 never was cultivated for agriculture. At least 300 native plant species continue to thrive there.

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

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