

LONG ISLAND / SUFFOLK

Public, private partnership funds used to weed out invasive species in Stony Brook Creek



Ward Melville Heritage Organization, with funding from Suffolk County, used new technology to get rid phragmites, an invasive plant species spreading across Long Island's wetlands. (Credit: Newsday / Morgan Campbell)

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An invasive species is hurting Long Island's wetlands, growing unchecked, crowding out native plants and clogging waterways.

However, this week, the Ward Melville Heritage Organization, with funding from Suffolk County and others, began implementing a new method to get rid of phragmites, also known as the common reed, in an effort to save Stony Brook Creek.

"Over the last couple of years, we see phragmites grow out of control," said Gloria Rocchio, president of WMHO. "This was the perfect opportunity."

A phragmite is a grass that can reach over 15 feet in height, according to the New York Invasive Species Information website. They form dense, clonal stands and spread through rhizomes, underground “root” systems interconnected with other phragmites.

The \$21,500 pilot program aims to get rid of 12,000 square feet of the reed in five areas along the creek, without chemicals or invasive mechanical equipment. Instead, it uses a hand-cutting process.

“We wanted to find the best solution, and a solution that doesn’t hurt the environment,” said Gabrielle Lindau, director of development at WMHO.

It consists of a handheld tool that is used to cut at the plant. Specific details of how it works were not shared since a patent is pending, said Joel Usher, owner of Usher Plant Care, which is licensed to use the new technology. But he said it’s “technology never used before.”

It doesn’t pollute the environment like herbicides, which are often used, or dig up the earth like other mechanical equipment, especially since estuaries are sensitive environments. “We wanted the most effective, least invasive way to heal,” Usher said. “We don’t want to hurt the planet while we heal it.”

Previously, the technology was demonstrated on approximately 400 square feet at the creek, and it was successful, he said. The hope is that this pilot program, with its test on a larger area along Stony Brook Creek, will continue to show positive results.

“If it works, it’s a tremendous impact over all of Long Island, because there’s a lot of phragmites out there,” said Rocchio.

The removal process started Tuesday before the plants’ pollination and is expected to continue for 21 days. It will be handled by North Shore Tree and Landscaping and Usher Plant Care, Usher said.

In addition, volunteers from some private businesses, including Lessing’s Hospitality Group and People’s United Bank, helped remove debris around the area to prevent silt buildup. Around 40 total volunteers will assist throughout the process, according to WMHO spokeswoman Marie Gilberti.

“We all live and grow our families here on Long Island,” said Michael Lessing, president of Lessing’s Hospitality Group, who cleaned up debris Tuesday. “We love our natural resources, the beaches, bays ... we need to better the place we live and work.”

It was hard work, Lessing said, that involved clearing out logs, railroad ties and telephone poles that were preventing the natural flow of water in the creek. Pieces were cut so they could be carried out, and it was a very muddy day, he said.

Half of the cost of the phragmites removal project will come from Suffolk County and the other half from WMHO and Avalon Park and Preserve. Another 1,900 square feet of phragmites near the creek, funded by WMHO alone, will also be targeted.

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