



Staten Island's fire-prone phragmites to be cleared, and eventually, eradicated

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By **Deborah Young/Staten Island Advance**



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Anthony DePrimo

Brett Gore of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife operates the Marshmaster as part of the city's phragmite mowing program to protect residents in high risk brush fire areas. Thursday (Staten Island Advance/Anthony DePrimo)

Phragmites mowed down to protect neighbors adjoining

Gateway gallery (9 photos)

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The last time the Marsh Master rolled its powerful blades over the loathed, fire-prone weeds that grow along Kissam Avenue in New Dorp, and cover large swaths of Staten Island's southeastern shore, it was November, and the stalks were dried out and tired, and crackled as they fell.

Grateful residents came out to watch the phragmites be cleared away, relieved that for the first time in decades, their fears about living in a tinder box were being addressed by government agencies and lawmakers.

Yesterday, as promised, the Marsh Master, a machine like a seated lawnmower on steroids, was back -- pushing its way

through a sea of green plants that had grown nearly six feet high.

It rumbled forward, sending the sweet smell of fresh-cut leaves into the air, and leaving a carpet of moist stubs in its wake.

"This really is a team effort; our goal is not to have this just a one shot deal," said Gateway Superintendent Linda Canzanelli, at a gathering of some of borough's city and state lawmakers, leaders from the state Department of Environmental Conservation, city Fire and Parks Departments and other agencies who are working together to tackle the Island's phragmites problem.

Using a \$110,000 federal grant secured through Sen. Charles Schumer (D-New York), the Mash Master will be hard at work from now through September. The machine, on loan to National Parks from the Department of Fish and Wildlife, will

Phragmites scaled back in Staten Island

Kissam Avenue in Oakwood Beach was the first to be a part of the city's phragmite mowing program, made possible through collaboration with the DEC, Gateway Park and other agencies. The Marshmaster, an amphibious vegetation removal vehicle, will periodically remove the phragmites to keep residents safe in brush fire zones along the East shore.

create fire-breaks in areas never-before cleared, passing through at least twice over the course of the next few months to mow down growth in residential neighborhoods and 100 feet in Great Kills Park between Buffalo Street and the Oakwood Sewage treatment plant, which borders homes.

"Our goal is to have in place a community wildfire protection plan -- A long-term tool the community can use ...to help reduce the danger between the wild land interface and those community members," said Superintendent Canzanelli.

Officials yesterday confirmed that by this fall, they could indeed be ready with the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) - an agreement seen as something of a Holy Grail in the fight against phragmites.

The document -- currently under review by state and city agencies to ensure adherence to environmental compliance regulations -- will lay out a clear multi-agency plan to permanently eradicate the weeds.

With the end goal of potentially repopulating phragmites-infested areas with native plants and wetland species, some of the discussions on the table include limited use of herbicide in environmentally appropriate areas, along with other methods that go beyond the band-aid approach of mowing to ensure the phragmites go away, and do not come back.

"Today you are seeing history being made," said Borough President James P. Molinaro. "You are seeing government doing what it should be doing...a lot of agencies came together, working together."

Phyllis and Anthony Puglia, who lost half their home two years ago in a raging blaze in 2010 and have witnessed many fires in their 18 years living on the block, said the clearing away of the weeds will make them finally feel safe this season.

"This is great; it's a God send," said Mrs. Puglia. "Now I just hope they keep doing it. That they keep their promise."

Community Risk Assessment



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