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Thwarting the Phragmites

Several recently initiated, cooperative projects are targeting the invasion of Phragmites on the Eastern Shore.

Phragmites australis, the perennial wetland grass known as common reed, has become a serious pest. It's an aggressive invader of wetlands, producing nearly impenetrable stands of reeds up to 12 feet tall. Beneficial wetland plants are displaced by the Phragmites, which provides little food or shelter value to wildlife. Why Phragmites has extended its dominance over so many marshes is the subject of disagreement among scientists.

Some speculate that a more aggressive variety has evolved or been imported from abroad. Others believe it's the same old species simply taking advantage of the conditions man has created by disturbing areas bordering salt marshes.

Using a rotary-wing gyro-copter and video camera, the Nature Conservancy has mapped Phragmites stands on the barrier islands and the mainland edge of the coastal bays from Cape Charles to Wallops Island. The survey, funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, shows that Phragmites is widely distributed along the eastern upland/salt marsh edge of the peninsula and is starting to invade many pristine wetland habitats in the interior of the barrier islands



Other cooperative efforts involve experimental restoration of two former dredge spoil sites, and a demonstration project for control and restoration of several plots of Phragmites. These projects are the result of partnerships between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Nature Conservancy, Virginia Commonwealth University, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Control and restoration efforts involve a combination of aerial spraying of a biodegradable, non-toxic herbicide (Rodeo), controlled burning of the sites, and replanting.

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