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Great Marsh Ditch Restoration to Begin This Spring Using New, Innovative Technique, at Old Town Hill Reservation in Newbury

Newbury, Essex & Ipswich, MA – March 6, 2020 – The Trustees of Reservations (The Trustees) is pleased to announce it has received the necessary environmental and regulatory permits for the second phase of an innovative project to restore 85 acres of compromised salt marsh at Old Town Hill in Newbury. Work on the site will begin in late March or early April, weather-permitting.

The approvals follow a habitat monitoring period, and 10 months of permitting processes, including a Massachusetts Environmental Protection Act (MEPA) review, receipt of an order of conditions from the Newbury Town Conservation Commission, a DEP Wetlands review, a DEP Waterways (Chapter 91) license, and permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“This marks the first time a project of this type—using the ‘ditch remediation’ technique—has been permitted in Massachusetts,” says Russell Hopping, Trustees Lead Ecologist, Coastal Ecology. “There are many layers of permitting involved for our coastal wetlands and salt marsh, especially in an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), and the current regulations provide very little wiggle room for new restoration methods given the importance of salt marsh. The regulators involved were very supportive and saw the merit in its implementation as a means of helping the marsh be more resilient to sea-level rise, a serious threat to our coastal marshes.”

The restoration project aims to fortify salt marsh which over time has been compromised by historic ditching, destroying natural draining processes and leaving the area increasingly vulnerable to floods and sea-level rise. In order to ‘heal’ these ditches, the Trustees and partners are using a new, nature-based method of “ditch remediation” which, to date, has only been piloted on a very limited basis on the neighboring USFWS Parker River Wildlife Refuge. Ultimately the full project will involve 330 acres of salt marsh, including Trustees properties in Essex and Ipswich, and Newbury and 30 acres within a state-owned Wildlife Management Area. The parcels in Essex and Ipswich are now in the design phase, and slated to enter the permitting phase this spring. The Trustees protects more than 15% of the Great Marsh, the largest coastal marsh in New England at 20,000 acres.



Above: Much of the Great Marsh ecosystem has been compromised due to widespread historic ditching, an agricultural practice dating back to early colonial days and up until the early 1900s when marsh hay farming was ultimately abandoned, allowing the marsh to flood as agricultural infrastructure fell into disrepair. During the Great Depression, vast re-ditching programs were launched to drain the marsh, in some cases for mosquito control in areas viewed as swampy, nuisance land.



Using the nature-based “healing” technique, harvested salt marsh hay will be placed and staked into 138 of 219 existing ditches at Old Town Hill in Newbury, with all work performed by hand and with a push mower. The hay will then trap sediment from the incoming tides and rebuild marsh “peat” naturally over time, to restore proper hydrology that will improve the health and natural function of the marsh. When work begins in Newbury, weather-permitting in late March or early April, the hay will be harvested on site, and secured into the

bottom of the ditches using stakes and twine. Work will be planned around the low tides, during daylight hours, with volunteer opportunities to participate. Once the hay is layered within the ditches, a long-term monitoring period begins, estimated to take up to five years.

“This innovative trial will be an excellent opportunity for our current, and new volunteers to connect to our coastal work, and have a direct impact on the health of this vital habitat and ecosystem,” says Marc Mahan, Trustees Volunteer Program Manager. “We’re looking for people who are passionate about protecting our coast, and are ready to jump in, and ‘get their hands dirty.’ We have a number of exciting opportunities to join our Coastal Volunteer Corps, including salt marsh hay layering, mosquito larvae monitoring, bird monitoring and much more. Volunteer events and opportunities kick off this spring, so please get in touch if you’d like to receive updates, and be a part of our coastal volunteer community.”

Focus on the Great Marsh

The Trustees Great Marsh project is funded through several grants, including a [\\$217,931 National Coastal Resilience Fund grant](#) from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), NOAA, Shell and TransRe; \$100,000 from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) grant program, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA); \$30,000 from the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program; \$80,000 in state grant funds through the Department of Fish and Game’s (DFG) Division of Ecological Restoration’s (DER) Priority Projects Program; and a \$15,740 MassBays grant.

Much of the Great Marsh ecosystem has been compromised due to ditching, an agricultural practice dating back to early colonial days and up until the early 1900s when marsh hay farming was ultimately abandoned, allowing the marsh to flood as agricultural infrastructure fell into disrepair. During the Great Depression, vast re-ditching programs were launched to drain the marsh, in some cases for mosquito control in areas viewed as swampy, nuisance land. By the late 1930s nearly 94% of New England salt marshes had been re-ditched, and today the remnants of these ditches continue to disrupt natural tidal flow, especially as they get clogged or break down and retain excess water on the marsh.

As the largest conservation nonprofit in Massachusetts with 27,000 acres under its care, including 37 coastal sites and 120 miles of managed waterfront, The Trustees recognizes the urgent need to bolster the resilience of its properties which are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the effects of our changing climate. An extensive [climate vulnerability assessment](#) (CVA) conducted by The Trustees in partnership with The Woods Hole Group in 2017—the first of its kind by a statewide conservation nonprofit—identified coastal beaches and salt marshes as two of the most “at risk” natural areas.

Soon thereafter, The Trustees launched its “Saving the Great Marsh: Ditch Remediation, Habitat Preservation and Resiliency Building at the Landscape Scale,” project in the summer of 2018. The goal of the project is to help the marsh keep pace with sea level rise so it can continue to serve as a buffer to adjacent uplands from storm surge and provide habitat for species that rely on it, including the Salt Marsh Sparrow; American Black Duck; Mallard; Green-Winged Teal; Gadwall; Greater Scaup; Common Goldeneye; Bufflehead; Red-Breasted Merganser; Canada Goose; and Atlantic Brant.

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More about The Trustees

Founded in the City of Boston by landscape architect and open space visionary Charles Eliot in 1891, The Trustees is the nation’s first and the Massachusetts’ largest preservation and conservation nonprofit with a mission to preserve and share places of natural and historic significance and beauty with everyone, forever. With 118 natural and historic sites located from the Berkshires to the Cape and the Islands, Trustees sites range from barrier beaches and coastal landscapes to working farms, designed landscapes and gardens, historic homesteads, and urban and community parks. Supported by generous members, donors, volunteers and supporters, The Trustees welcomes millions of residents and visitors to its properties annually and offers thousands of engaging experiences and programs designed to inspire a deeper connection to nature and the outdoors, conservation, community, and culture. www.thetrustees.org.