

Friends of Herring River



Herring River Restoration Project Summary – September 2016

The goal of the Herring River Restoration Project is to restore a healthy, functioning tidal marsh within the Herring River flood plain by re-establishing tidal exchange in the river basin and its connected sub-basins. Tidal exchange will be increased incrementally over time using an adaptive management approach to achieve desired conditions for native estuarine habitats.

The Herring River is the largest river system within the Cape Cod National Seashore and one of the largest tidally-restricted estuaries in New England. In its historic natural state, the river supported a vibrant estuary and the largest diadromous fish run on Outer Cape Cod. Construction of a dike at the mouth of the river in 1909 and other alterations to the river's natural hydrology eliminated tidal flow and transformed the estuary into one of Cape Cod's most degraded natural resources.

The Herring River's wetland resources and natural ecosystem functions have been severely damaged by the past 100 years of tidal restriction and salt marsh drainage. Adverse impacts include:

- severe degradation of water quality caused by soil acidification;
- periodic oxygen depletions leading to fish kills;
- loss of approximately 1,000 acres of estuarine wetlands;
- loss of diadromous and marine fish access to the estuary and freshwater spawning ponds;
- elimination of shellfish habitat;
- plant community changes including loss of salt marsh vegetation and increase in nonnative, invasive species;
- and wetland subsidence of up to three feet caused by increased decomposition, dewatering and reduced sediment supply.

Since the early 1970s, Seashore scientists and others have been studying the Herring River and documenting its degraded condition. In 2007, following a citizen led study that recommended the restoration of tidal flow in historic marsh, the Towns of Wellfleet and Truro and the Cape Cod National Seashore established the Herring River Restoration Committee and tasked it with preparing an Environmental Impact Statement and Report (EIS/EIR) and developing a detailed restoration plan.

Engineering and preliminary design of a bridge with tide control gates to replace the Chequessett Neck Road dike, a new dike and tide gates at Mill Creek and a tide control structure at Pole Dike Road to control water levels in Upper Pole Dike Creek have been completed. Several sections of low-lying roads will have to be raised and culverts replaced where needed.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) required analyses of the environmental consequences and impacts of restoring tidal flow in the river to avoid, minimize or mitigate any environmental damage. The Final EIS/EIR was published in June 2016.

On July 15th, the Commonwealth's Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs issued a certificate that that the Final Environmental Impact Report "... adequately and properly complies with the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act." On September 21st, The Regional Director for the National Park Service Northeast Region signed the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Herring River Restoration Project. RODs are formal decision documents resulting from National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reviews. Once the regional

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director signs a ROD, the NEPA process formally ends, and subsequent phases of project implementation, to include submission of permit applications, may begin.

The Towns of Wellfleet and Truro and the National Park Service have signed Memorandum of Understanding III, which sets forth the roles and responsibilities to implement the project. The next step is to apply for local, state and federal permits, and then, depending upon issuing of permits and availability of funding, construction may begin in 2019 - 2020.