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Hazard Reduction at Mashpee NWR

Response and recovery on Cape Cod

By Catherine J. Hibbard

“It’s amazing we pulled this off as well as we did,” said Jim Rassman of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Rassman serves as stewardship coordinator of the Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, site of a meeting of partners of Mashpee National Wildlife Refuge. Several other partners, including representatives from Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex, the Service’s Northeast Fire Program, the planning and fire departments of the Town of Mashpee, and the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian Tribe were on hand to review a road-clearing project the refuge had implemented to reduce the risk of wildfire in the area.

The project, coordinated by Deputy Refuge Manager Tom Eagle, was a challenge from the start. Mashpee National Wildlife Refuge, located in the towns of Falmouth and Mashpee on Cape Cod encompasses 4100-acres of non-contiguous public and private ownership managed through a unique partnership among nine federal, state, and private conservation groups. Fewer than 350 acres are owned by the Service. “It’s hard enough to get work done on your refuge, but when you have this many players, it really increases the level of complexity,” said Eagle.

Mashpee National Wildlife Refuge is entirely within the wildland urban interface, where natural areas abut buildings. Undeveloped woodlands, bogs, and marshes of the refuge are dominated by pitch pines and oaks, disturbance-dependent species promoted by logging, grazing, agriculture, and wildfires. More urban than natural areas exist in the wildland urban interface of this area, and brush and trees had encroached on narrow refuge roads, making them impassible for

fire engines. This threatened efforts to keep wildfires as small as possible and protecting human life and homes in and around Mashpee.

Clearing roads to improve access and protect firefighter safety was the highest priority recommendation of a Wildland Fuel Hazard Assessment conducted for the refuge in 2008. Tom Eagle worked with the regional fire program to secure funding to clear vegetation along 64,000 feet of roads owned by the Service, Massachusetts DCR and Fish and Game, the Town of Mashpee, and the Wampanoag Indian Tribe in the spring/summer of 2009. Due to budget and equipment issues, the project did not get the green light until late April, leaving little time to react. But Eagle and other partners sprang into action. They scheduled equipment, worked with Massachusetts Heritage and the Service’s Endangered Species Program to protect the Eastern box turtle, made presentations to local government groups, and issued a press release that was published in the Cape Cod Times. On May 19 roadside clearing began.

Service personnel from Eastern Mass. National Wildlife Refuge Complex, the Service’s Northeast Regional Office and Wallkill River and Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuges pitched in to help. Throughout the project they tested the effectiveness of various pieces of heavy equipment on loan from the Chesapeake Marshlands and Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge Complexes. The Town of Mashpee Department of Public Works provided road signs, a chipper, and labor, while the Fire Department offered a staging area at their fire station and technical expertise through Fire Department Chief George Baker. Rassman also supplied guidance and coordinated labor and logistics for



Regional Fire Planner Rick Vollick (left) addresses partners of Mashpee National Wildlife Refuge on a field trip to review the project.

Massachusetts DCR. Workers wrapped up the initial phase of road clearing on June 12. “This project would not have been a success without the support of our partners,” said Eagle.

Future efforts will be improved by lessons learned during this initial effort. Energized by momentum, the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian Tribe bought a new truck and hired a staff person to patrol the refuge and deter or report illegal dumping that increases fire threats. The Town of Mashpee instituted a fall neighborhood campaign to chip homeowner brush dropped at the curb. The Friends of Mashpee National Wildlife Refuge discussed outreach to educate homeowners about fire, as well as steps they can take to fireproof their homes. And the Service plan chainsaw and basic wildfire training for local fire departments.

The refuge will be undertaking future actions recommended by the hazardous fuels assessment to reduce fire risk and benefit pine barrens, and the scattered Atlantic white cedar swamps, both systems dependent on conditions created by fire. This will include clearing more vegetation along roads to improve their function as fire breaks, using prescribed fire to remove flammable understory plants, thinning trees to open up tree canopies and reduce the risk of dangerous crown fires, and providing defensible space around buildings. “We are going in the right direction,” concludes Chief Baker, “but we need to do a lot more.” □

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