



## USFWS INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** 6/23/2023

**TO:** Regional Director, Northeast Region

**FROM:** Regional NWRS Chief, Northeast Region

**SUBJECT:** Proposed demolition of refuge-owned vacant house – the “Pink House” – in Newbury, MA.

### I. STATEMENT OF ISSUE/KEY FACTS

The US Fish and Wildlife Service, Parker River NWR, acquired the Pink House property in 2011; a tract of about 9 acres of mostly salt marsh and a 3 bedroom residence. Deemed unsuitable for staff housing, the Service proposed to demolish the structure in 2014, prompting community backlash. The Service agreed to work with community partners to exchange the property, but after numerous unsuccessful attempts spanning nearly 7 years, demolition and habitat restoration is now in the best interest of the Service.

### II. BACKGROUND AND FWS POSITION

The Pink House is situated in a highly visible location en route to the Plum Island portion of Parker River NWR, on Plum Island Turnpike in Newbury, MA. Constructed in 1925, it is a local cultural landmark and much beloved among many residents of the area. Initially purchased for possible staff housing, the deteriorated condition and presence of contaminants such as asbestos led staff to propose demolition of the structure. In response, a grass roots group – Support The Pink House, Inc. (STPH) – was formed to advocate for its preservation. The Service agreed to put forward a good faith effort to exchange the property for higher-value wildlife habitat either at Parker River NWR, and when that proved difficult, later at other refuges throughout the Northeast Region. Below is a timeline of the significant events throughout this process:

- Sept. 2011: USFWS acquires the Pink House along with 9.29 acres of marsh and tidal creek for \$375,000. The Pink House does not meet the criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Dec. 2014: A preliminary environmental survey of the building is completed, finding accessible asbestos-containing building material. The Service determines that the building is not suitable as housing for seasonal staff, and that no other use for the refuge is feasible.
- March 2016: The Service proposes demolition of the structure to take place that spring. ‘Support the Pink House’ group forms and the refuge receives letters from local and federally elected officials suggesting a stay in demolition.
- August 2016: The Service agrees to delay demolition, working with partners to affect a land exchange.
- 2017-2019: Essex Co. Greenbelt Assoc., a local land trust and adjacent landowner, agrees to facilitate land exchange for 375 acres of Greenbelt-owned salt marsh (‘Graf Reservation’) for the Pink House parcel, while STPH agrees to locate a future buyer for the Pink House. An



Agreement to Initiate Exchange was signed, and the appraisal ordered. However, in September 2019, Greenbelt and MassWildlife placed these lands under a conservation restriction (NAWCA easement) with the Commonwealth of MA, the terms of which made it impossible for the Service to acquire those lands in fee title.

- July 2020: Greenbelt identifies two additional parcels – Catterton Camp and Alexander Marsh, off Stackyard Rd in Rowley, MA – for which they were willing to facilitate an exchange. However, with only 10 acres, an existing abandoned structure, and an assessed value less than 25% of what the 1-acre Pink House parcel appraised at (\$425k), an exchange of these lands was not viable. Greenbelt has no additional parcels they are willing to consider.
- December 2020: with local options proximate to the refuge exhausted, an attempt was made to locate suitable exchange parcels elsewhere in the Northeast Region. An Agreement to Initiate a Land Exchange was signed between the Service and STPH, and later a Boundary Line Agreement was signed with the adjacent landowner. A suitable exchange parcel was located near Cherry Valley NWR in PA. Closing slated for September 2022.
- August 2022: STPH receives approval from the MA Historical Commission for a perpetual preservation restriction to be put on the house. The Newbury Historical Commission agrees to hold and enforce the PR.
- September 2022: The landowner in PA backs out of the deal at a late stage, again leaving no viable exchange parcel for the Pink House. Refuge manager updates elected officials and STPH in an October 12<sup>th</sup> meeting.
- March 2023: Refuge manager holds a meeting with the offices of Sen. Markey, Rep. Moulton, and State Senator Tarr detailing the complexities with this particular exchange and the reasons why each attempt to date has fallen through. Noted that the current strategy is not sustainable, and the Service may need to look to other options – including demolition – soon.

In addition to the above-listed exchange parcels for which an agreement was formally initiated, the refuge and its partners reached out to numerous adjacent landowners and those within 1 mile of the refuge – public and private – to gauge their interest in being a party to a land exchange. All (except Greenbelt) were unwilling or unable to sell or exchange their lands. The Pink House group itself does not own any lands.

Currently, the house itself is an attractive nuisance, having been vandalized as recently as May, 2023. It requires constant interior and exterior monitoring and maintenance to ensure there are no major issues – such as roof leaks – that could lead to catastrophic damage. For those who are apathetic, or not knowledgeable about its local lore, the structure is an abandoned, dilapidated eyesore in an otherwise picturesque salt marsh containing high-value wildlife habitat. Of course, to others it is much more than that.

The refuge is a leader in salt marsh restoration and management. Now that – after working diligently for 7 years in good faith to exchange the property – a land-for-land exchange that would add higher-value habitat to the refuge system is not realistic, restoring the site to its natural condition is the preferred option. In addition to the wildlife benefits associated with restoration, there are also aesthetic, operational, and financial benefits to the government in doing so. Further, the Pink House is surrounded by an area that is already prone to flooding, and recent sea level rise projections indicate that this area will flood with much greater frequency and intensity (i.e., once per month or more) as soon as 2030 ([Horsley Witten Group 2021](#)). Such specific dire projections were not available when the process to exchange the property began in 2016, nor when the house was purchased in 2011.



### III. POSITION OF AFFECTED PARTIES/PUBLIC LANDS AFFECTED

*Proponents:* We believe that the Friends of Parker River NWR, Mass Audubon, wildlife observers, Greenbelt, and some residents will be pleased with the decision to demolish the structure. Those who advocate for salt marsh restoration and increased opportunities for wildlife observation will be pleased to see the site restored to its natural condition, and possibly opened for public viewing.

*Opponents:* STPH has local support, although this appears to have waned in recent years. Artists and photographers frequent the Pink House to draw inspiration. Many residents and visitors of Plum Island will be very disappointed to see this local landmark gone and will be vocal in opposition to the decision. The town of Newbury may also publicly oppose the position.

*Neutral:* We believe the state of Massachusetts will be a neutral party, neither supporting nor publicly opposing this decision. The congressional delegation has been very supportive and understanding throughout and frequently acknowledges the considerable resources in time and money the Service has undertaken for over 7 years to affect an exchange.

### IV. STATUS UPDATE

For the reasons outlined above, the refuge and realty division have paused indefinitely on identifying additional exchange parcels. Further, the realty division noted that within the region there are currently no suitable properties that approach the \$425,000 appraised value of the Pink House parcel – and indeed, acquisitions of this magnitude are rare – only 5% of all acquisitions in the past 5 years. Added to that the lack of willing sellers and the Pink House parcel has proven a poor candidate for exchange, as it continues to deteriorate after not having been lived in for 15 years. The refuge continues to update congressional offices routinely on progress, and to communicate with STPH.

### V. POTENTIAL ISSUES

Given the very high visibility of the house, and the controversial nature of this decision, future demolition will likely create large crowds along a busy Turnpike, and possibly even public protests. Therefore, demolition should take place in the off-season (winter months) to mitigate these issues as much as possible, and additional refuge law enforcement and local police details should be used for traffic flow, monitoring public safety, and minimizing trespass.

### VI. TIMELINE/NEXT STEPS

The refuge will work with the Office of Communications to develop a communications plan and reach out to elected officials, local towns, proponents and opponents to inform and educate about the decision to move forward with demolition of the Pink House. The goal is to finalize a comms plan this summer and go public with the decision in the fall, followed shortly thereafter with hazardous materials remediation and demolition. If possible, we would like to complete demolition in December or January of 2024, followed by site restoration, by local station staff and Great American Outdoors Act Strike Team members.

**Prepared by:** Matt Hillman

☐ **FYI**    or    ☐ **Requested by:** [name]



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☐ **Prepared for a meeting:**