



# Grassy Island Forum Discussion Record



Wyandotte Boat Club, Wyandotte, Michigan  
December 1<sup>st</sup>; 7 – 9:30 PM

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## **Sponsored by:**

Detroit River Remedial Action Plan  
Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge  
Friends of the Detroit River  
Wayne County  
University of Michigan – Dearborn

The first Grassy Island Forum was held at the Wyandotte Boat Club in Wyandotte, Michigan on December 1, 2005. The event drew an audience of approximately 60 attendees and speakers. The purpose of the forum was to review what was known and unknown about Grassy Island, receive public input, clarify roles and responsibilities of the parties involved, and to develop a list of short-term actions that would complete the investigative phase and move forward in a coordinated fashion amongst the partners toward the goal of restoring Grassy Island. To receive more information about Grassy Island, go to: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/grassyisland>

This discussion record contains summaries of the key discussions and conclusions from the presentations, panel discussions, and public comments regarding Grassy Island.



## **PRESENTATIONS:**

### *An Historical Perspective of Grassy Island*

Dr. Bruce Manny, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)

Grassy Island appears on a 1796 map of Detroit River and was called “Ile Maricageuse” (Marshy Island). The first known use of Grassy Island was for commercial fishing purposes. An 1873 fisheries report indicates that spawning whitefish were seined in on the island, producing 45,000 adult whitefish per season. In the late 1800s, the U.S. Coast Guard installed navigational lights (lighted towers) near the island for ships down bound in the Fighting Island Channel

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (U.S. ACE) built a dike surrounding the island to dispose of contaminated sediments from the Rouge River. The dike was completed in 1961. It was 6’ tall and was designed to contain 930,000 cubic yards of material. In 1961, legislation was passed making Grassy Island and the surrounding shoals a National Wildlife Refuge. Additional disposal capacity was needed, so in 1971, a 20’ dike was constructed inside the previously diked area. Approximately three million cubic yards of dredged spoils from the Rouge River had been disposed of in Grassy Island, by 1982, when the U.S. ACE last deposited material there.

When placed in the disposal area on Grassy Island, the sediments dredged from the Rouge River were described in reports as being grossly polluted with high concentrations of oil, iron, and volatile solids. In 1997, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) funded studies to determine the nature and extent of contaminants on Grassy Island. Results from those studies will be discussed in greater detail in Dr. Millsap’s presentation.

### *Grassy Island Status*

Dr. Stephanie Millsap, U.S. FWS

When the broad goals for the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge are applied to Grassy Island, the Island should provide needed habitat for fish and wildlife, as well as contaminant concentrations that do not pose risks to wildlife or human visitors. Given the history of Grassy Island, further investigation of contaminants on the island is necessary prior to making any habitat improvements. Previous investigations conducted by the FWS and USGS quantified the type and extent of contamination. The mean concentrations of 27 substances in soil (including PCBs, PAHs, and heavy metals) exceeded one or more criteria for protection of human health, protection of aquatic life in freshwaters, or protection of fish and wildlife trust resources.

While the extent of contamination is known, it is uncertain what risks these contaminants may pose or how well contaminants are contained by the surrounding dikes. Therefore, to move forward there needs to be agreement on the information needed to assess significance of potential release pathways and an evaluation of risks to the environment and human health given various management alternatives. The results from those studies would be used to determine what, if any, actions need to be taken to provide an island that is healthy and safe for both people and wildlife, and meets Refuge goals for wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities for the public.

*Dredging 101 – Doing Environmental Dredging without Harming the Environment*  
Jim Ridgway, Environmental Consulting and Technology, Inc

A number of environmentally-friendly dredging techniques are available that may be useful at the site if it becomes necessary to dredge the sediments surrounding Grassy Island. Some of those techniques were presented. Factors such as weather and site conditions will greatly affect the expense of dredging operations. There are logistical and economic efficiencies that can be created by incorporating ecological restoration activities into remedial activities.

*A Citizen's Perspective on Grassy Island*  
Blair McGowen, Friends of the Detroit River

Lessons learned during the successful effort to preserve Humbug Marsh, and how they could be applied to Grassy Island, were shared. Citizens must be involved and be willing to be an active voice within the community, as well as inform their legislators that Grassy Island is an important issue. Citizens want areas in the community cleaned up, full access to natural resources, a sense of pride, and increasing property values. A collaborative approach in respect to Grassy Island is necessary because litigation will delay progress towards the end goal. We must also realize that the ideas for Grassy Island will likely evolve over time. It took eight years to achieve success at Humbug, and we need to be prepared that it may take that long, or longer, to finish Grassy Island. However, recent successes with preserving Humbug Marsh and remediating Black Lagoon offer considerable hope to citizens that restoring Grassy Island is possible. We need to build on these successes to continue to make progress.

**INTERACTIVE PANEL:**

The panel consisted of the following agency representatives: Craig Czarnecki (U.S. FWS), Mike Fulford (U.S. ACE), Rose Ellison (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or EPA), and Joe Walczak (Michigan Department of Environmental Quality or MDEQ). All four agencies committed to work in partnership to complete the investigative phase for Grassy Island. Panel members spoke briefly about how their respective agency could provide assistance with the investigative phase of Grassy Island.

- U.S. FWS said that further investigation of the potential contaminant release pathways and risks was necessary and that the Service would work collaboratively with partners. The U.S. FWS is dedicated to ensuring that Grassy Island meets Refuge goals in a way that is cost and time effective.
- U.S. ACE indicated that there were divisions within the Corps that had technical expertise that could assist with scoping activities.
- U.S. EPA indicated that it could make the Research Vessel “Mudpuppy” available should it be needed to do investigative work. On a case-by-case basis, it may be able to assist in other ways including technical review or use of equipment.
- MDEQ noted that its Superfund Section would provide technical oversight of the work being performed during the investigative phase, through a cooperative agreement, by providing guidance on state regulations, reviewing and providing input on investigative work. Their Water Division may also be able to provide some technical assistance.

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The panel also answered questions from the audience, followed by a facilitated discussion of next steps in completing the investigative phase. Comments, concerns, and issues raised by Forum participants included:

- Concern was raised for the adequacy and integrity of Grassy Island dikes – it was noted that when the dikes were built they were built with the best available methods;
- It was noted that a catastrophic failure of the dike system could have an impact on navigation and water quality in the river;
- The partners were encouraged to involve Canadian partners as well.
- The issue of available money was brought up – it was noted that \$1 million was appropriated in 2001 for the restoration of Grassy Island and that approximately \$600,000 remained to complete the investigative phase and undertake feasibility work;
- It was suggested that the federal partners make Grassy Island a priority under the new Great Lakes Regional Collaboration;
- Participants suggested that additional funding for completing the investigative phase for Grassy Island be sought through a grant to Great Lakes National Program Office in 2006 under the Detroit River Remedial Action Plan (RAP);
- Citizens could take the lead and develop a “marketing piece” that articulates a “desired future state” for Grassy Island through a visioning workshop;
- U.S. Coast Guard participation was questioned – it was noted that they do not normally get involved in these kinds of cleanup activities;
- It was suggested that perhaps the knowledge base for Grassy Island could be expanded by biological surveys like those completed for Humbug Marsh;
- The U.S. FWS was encouraged to add an interactive section to its Grassy Island web site to solicit input on Grassy Island in the future;
- Participants asked about available technical studies from U.S. ACE and its Waterways Experiment Station in Vicksburg, Mississippi – it was noted that no hydraulic model existed and no dye studies have been performed;
- Concern was voiced for agreement on data and knowledge gaps for Grassy Island – it was noted by the U.S. FWS that the primary gaps were wildlife and human health risk assessment, identification and quantification of significant release pathways, and dike wall integrity;
- Participants noted that we need a clear road map for completing the investigative phase by March 2006; and
- Participants also suggested that bioremediation should be considered as a remedial alternative for Grassy Island.

**NEXT STEPS:**

Following the facilitated discussion, Grassy Island Forum participants recommended the following “next steps” to complete the investigative phase for Grassy Island and move forward in a coordinated fashion amongst the partners:

1. By the end of February 2006, MDEQ, U.S. FWS, U.S. EPA, U.S. ACE, and USGS (Water Resources Division and Biological Division) should:

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- a. reach agreement on a problem definition for Grassy Island (based on the Preliminary Assessment/Site Inspection as statement of what we know about the environmental and natural resource issues);
  - b. collaboratively scope out the remaining portion of the investigative phase for Grassy Island (i.e., identify the necessary studies and investigations needed to fill data and knowledge gaps, including assessing human health and wildlife risk, identifying significant release pathways, and evaluating dike wall integrity); and
  - c. propose a schedule to complete all recommended studies and investigations.
2. By the end of February 2006, Friends of Detroit River, the City of Wyandotte, Detroit Audubon Society, Detroit River Remedial Action Plan, International Wildlife Refuge Alliance, and other interested stakeholder groups should undertake a citizens' visioning exercise to define a "desired future state" for Grassy Island, including both a description of desired uses and features, and a compelling graphic.
3. Friends of the Detroit River (FDR) have taken on the responsibility for the Detroit River Remedial Action Plan (RAP). FDR should make Grassy Island a top priority and demonstrate this by seeking funding support from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Great Lakes National Program Office during 2006 for helping complete the investigative phase for Grassy Island. Similarly, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality should explore the possibility of obtaining Michigan Great Lakes Protection Fund funding to help complete the investigative phase for Grassy Island and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Geological Survey should explore agency funding to help complete the investigative phase for Grassy Island.
4. During 2005 numerous biological surveys were performed on the Humbug Marsh Unit by volunteers. This included a breeding bird survey by Rouge River Bird Observatory, a herpetological survey called the Herpathon, wildflower surveys by the Michigan Botanical Club and the Michigan Wildflower Association, botanical surveys by the Michigan Natural Features Inventory, a benthos survey by the USGS Great Lakes Science Center, a dragon fly survey by University of Michigan-Dearborn, and a Christmas bird count by Detroit Audubon Society. A similar biological survey effort should be mounted during 2006 by International Wildlife Refuge Alliance, Friends of Detroit River, Grosse Ile Nature and Land Conservancy, and other partners to help fill biological data gaps and help better define biological targets for restoration.
5. Following agreement on a problem definition for Grassy Island, scoping out the remaining portion of the investigative phase (i.e., remedial investigation), and undertaking visioning exercise for Grassy Island by the end of February 2006, another Grassy Island Forum should be convened in early March 2006 to update concerned citizens, stakeholders, and parties on progress and the strategy for completing the investigative phase for Grassy Island. Similarly, an elected official briefing should be held in March 2006 to inform our Congressional and State legislators of progress and the strategy for completing the investigative phase for Grassy Island.
6. As soon as possible the federal agencies (i.e., U.S. FWS, U.S. ACE, USGS, and U.S. EPA) should each nominate Grassy Island as a priority project under the new federal initiative called the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration to help elevate the priority of Grassy Island and help ensure a coordinated approach.