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A neglected salt marsh is reclaimed

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ORLEANS -

A century ago the main idea was to turn salt marsh into farmland. Today we've done a 180-degree turn and where it's opportune, marshes are being restored around Cape Cod.

That's even the case with relatively small salt marshes such as a tiny tributary of Little Namskaket Creek in Orleans, just south of the Captain Linnell House.

The restoration, which began during the first week of October and will be done by the end of the month, was mixed in with some road work on Skaket Beach Road. Jeremy Bell, a wetlands restoration specialist with Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management, is the project manager.

"We've closed half the road off," he said. "We'll be replacing the water culvert over the next two weeks. The culvert that is there is 18 inches (in diameter). The culvert that is going in will be 5 feet by 4 feet."

Little Namskaket Creek runs to the right of Skaket Beach Road and a small unnamed creek runs under the road into seven acres of marsh on the left into what is known as Snow Bog. The bog was cut off from the main marsh by a berm so cranberries could be cultivated there years ago. The road now runs where the berm was and the bog has been swallowed by phragmites grass and poison ivy, multiflora rose and black locust.

The culvert is just south of Gull Lane and Linnell Road.

"There are two sections above (the culvert) One is a red maple swamp now. I don't think the red maple swamp will see any change," Bell said. "The change will be back in the section that is salt marsh. It will take some time but hopefully the phragmites will go back to the edge of the marsh. It will probably never be eliminated. But hopefully it will decline and the marsh will have more native species like salt marsh grass."

Spartina patens and *Spartina alterniflora* (short and tall cordgrass) are the dominant grasses in a salt marsh, where the taller *S. alterniflora* grows along the creeks and *S. patens* thrives in the more upland, less salty areas. When they decay they create the salt marsh peat that builds the marsh.

A healthy salt marsh provides a home for shellfish such as mussels and snails, small and large crabs and other crustaceans as well as multiple fish species. There are diamondback terrapins in the larger Namskaket Marsh to the south and it's possible they might wander into the Little Namskaket system.

"There are only a few houses surrounding the marsh, just the ecology of the marsh itself will be impacted," Bell said.

Orleans will also replace the storm drains on this section of road. Currently much of the runoff swooshes directly into the marsh. The new interception system will allow much of the sediment to settle out.

The new culvert will make it easier for fish to move into the upper marsh.

"It will be better for fish going in. The flushing will improve. You may have a dent in the mosquito population because the fish eat mosquitoes. Mummichogs are already there. And there will be greater numbers of sticklebacks, American eels, silversides. These are good prey fish for commercial species such as herring and striped bass," explained Bell.

The project is a collaborative effort. The Gulf of Maine Council, National Resource Conservation Service, town of Orleans and the Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management program have made contributions to the \$200,000 project.

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Barry Donahue
Orleans is restoring a salt marsh near Namskaket Creek.