

Dennis ecosystem gets new lease on life

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DENNIS — It may be weeks until spring, but Sesuit Creek should be showing new signs of life soon.

Starting this month, Bridge Street over Sesuit Creek was closed to traffic so construction crews could replace a 24-inch drainage pipe with large box culverts that will improve the tidal flow of saltwater in the marsh.

The work is part of a \$1.5 million salt marsh restoration project funded by local, state and federal agencies.

Sesuit Creek is a critical habitat for herring and the American eel. Parts of it, however, have been degraded and filled with invasive broomlike plants because not enough saltwater flowed through the old culvert, said Peggy Fantozzi, a technical consultant to the Dennis Conservation Commission.

Within the next few weeks, construction crews will replace the small opening under Bridge Street with two box culverts, each measuring 10 feet high by 12 feet long and separated only by a wall, said Dennis Town Engineer Joseph Rodricks.

The new culverts not only will improve the flow of saltwater, they should reduce the risk of flooding after storms, since backed-up water will be able to drain more quickly, said Fantozzi, who is volunteering time to work on the project.

Last week, a temporary dam was installed under Bridge Street to allow for excavation work on the new culverts.

As part of the project, workers also will install a sidewalk, move utility lines underground and restore some of the historical aspects of the culvert crossing, Rodricks said.

"We're going to make it look like a bridge with wooden timber railings," she said.

Bridge Street over the creek is closed until April, when it can be black-topped, he said.

By then, the saltmarsh already will be experiencing the benefits of being flushed daily with increased surges of saltwater.

Animal life will rebound most quickly, Fantozzi said.

Herring and eel will be able to swim farther up the creek, which serves as a herring run between Cape Cod Bay and Scargo Lake, she said. Fiddler and hermit crabs will benefit almost instantaneously, she added.

It could take five years or more before the saltwater destroys the roots of the phragmite plant, an

invasive weed that has taken over parts of Sesuit Creek, Fantozzi said.

The 12-foot tall plumed grass chokes out cattails and salt marsh cordgrass that provide habitat for waterfowl and small marine animals.

The town had success with a much smaller project about four years ago, when it improved the flow of tidal water in a small wetland to the east of Sesuit Creek, by Sea Street, Fantozzi said.

"That was sort of our trial balloon," Fantozzi said.

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