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Opinion

Stakes are too high to bet on Herring River project's success

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“Uncertainty” may be the most appropriate word to characterize the Herring River restoration project.

Planning for this project, although extensive, is based largely on modeling. But complex models do not ensure desirable outcomes.

Modeling was used to plan the Sesuit Creek restoration project. However, the model did not predict that 11 years after the project's completion, half the “restored” wetlands would remain barren mudflats.

Uncertainty is magnified by size and complexity. The Herring River restoration project is heralded as “the largest tidal estuary restoration ever undertaken in Massachusetts.” No track record exists to predict exactly how the myriad parts of this huge puzzle will fit together.

Uncertainty will be amplified by climate change and sea level rise. Exactly what impact those changes will have on the Herring River estuary cannot be precisely predicted. Nor can their interactions with changes proponents hope will lead to favorable results from increasing tidal flows.

The stakes are high, especially for the 15% of Wellfleet's year-round population whose livelihood depends on shellfishing. Modeling predicts that increasing Herring River tidal flow is unlikely to cause silt to smother oyster beds in Wellfleet Harbor.

When the stakes are so high, however, the probability of success must approach certainty.

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