

Truro seeks to withdraw from start of project



The town of Truro is seeking to withdraw from the first phase of a \$50 million federally funded restoration of the Herring River, citing the fact that the work, at first, will be primarily in Wellfleet. [Steve Heaslip/Cape Cod Times file]

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TRURO — The multimillion-dollar plan to repair degraded salt marshes in the Herring River appears to have lost a partner for its first phase after a unanimous vote this week by the Truro Select Board.

“It’s in the town’s best interest to remove ourselves as project partners to, frankly, prevent liability to the town,” Truro Town Manager Rae Ann Palmer said Tuesday at the Select Board’s meeting.

As planned, the \$50 million federally funded project is meant to repair ecological damage that has occurred due to the construction in 1909 of a dike at the mouth of the river, according to the final environmental impact statement.

While 1,000 acres of degraded salt marshes in northern Wellfleet and South Truro was an original target for the project, based on more than a decade of research and planning by the National Park Service and other agencies, the project has since last year been divided into phases. The current plan is to pursue restoration of about half that acreage, a Cape Cod National Seashore restoration ecologist said last year, and to exclude two areas of marshland where private property owners have not given permission for flooding of structures such as driveways on their property.

The reduction of the project's scope to the first phase has led to most of the work now occurring in Wellfleet, Palmer said.

"Truro supports the project," she said, referring to the environmental benefits.

But based on her own experience and in speaking with the town's attorney, the town should maintain a role as an abutter to the project's first phase, Palmer said.

With a third memorandum of understanding signed in 2016 by the towns of Wellfleet and Truro, and the National Park Service, the project moved into the implementation of the restoration plan. The project is in the midst of preparations to apply for a development of regional impact review before the Cape Cod Commission, project administrator Margo Fenn said in March.

"We're still several months away," Fenn said at that time.

As part of the memorandum of understanding, a 7-member Herring River Executive Council was established with members from the Park Service, and the towns of Wellfleet and Truro.

Both Palmer and Truro Select Board Chairman Robert Weinstein, who have sat on the council, described it as not functioning in a way that made sense for Truro. The town of Wellfleet owns the infrastructure being considered except for some roadways, and most of the real estate to be restored is owned by the federal government, Weinstein said.

"We know it's not a workable model," Palmer said.

With the town of Wellfleet, Truro hopes to work with the Park Service to modify the current agreement.

After reviewing a modified memorandum of understanding proposed by the Truro Select Chairwoman Janet Reinhart said, adding that she understands the first phase is primarily about Wellfleet.

For some, the project is controversial, Reinhart said.

"Not for me, not for the supporters," she said. "I don't know if (the Truro Select Board members) are getting pressure from people. There's a group of people who are pushing this whole liability thing."

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