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Bog stirs environmental debate

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Division in Falmouth on cranberry growers' spread of pesticides

By Peter DeMarco, Globe Correspondent, 11/17/2003

FALMOUTH -- "The Herring War" of 1806 came to a climactic, bloody end when protesters blasted a cannon full of dead fish onto Falmouth's town green.

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At the time, Coonamessett River mill owners and fishermen had been locked in a contentious dispute over dams that prevented river herring from migrating upstream. But when the cannon backfired, tragically killing its pro-mill gunner, the combatants' anger eased and the war faded away.

Nearly 200 years later, the Coonamessett River's herring are once again at the center of heated debate in Falmouth. But this time, fishermen and environmentalists are pitted against one of Cape Cod's most treasured symbols: the cranberry bog.

The debate, in its simplest form, comes down to whether the town should continue to allow cranberries to be commercially grown and harvested in the middle of a public river, a process that periodically involves halting the river's natural flow.

But to many involved, far more is at stake at the Town Meeting that starts tonight, during which members will reconsider a vote taken last April to discontinue commercial cranberry growing on about 45 acres of public bogs.

River proponents say the bogs must be excluded to stop the spread of farming pesticides and save the Coonamessett's fish, which suffer when bogs are flooded and water temperatures rise. Bog supporters, through letters to the Falmouth Enterprise newspaper, leaflets, and lawn signs, have begged Town Meeting members not to destroy the town's scenic bog vistas and a precious cultural landmark.

Others are not sure whether to blame Brian Handy, the cranberry grower who leases the town's bogs, for preventable fish kills; or the town for poor stewardship of its lands; or political infighting and personal vendettas for stoking the controversy.

Just how the Town Meeting will vote, no one can predict.

"In a perfect world, you wouldn't have a river going through a bog. You'd have them separate," said town administrator Robert Whritenour. "But that's not what we have. That's not how they built them 100 years ago."

The Coonamessett's bogs are unique, cranberry specialists say, because they are not separated from the river by berms as nearly all other Massachusetts cranberry bogs are. The river often runs through the bogs' center, and when the bogs are flooded for harvest, it is often impossible to tell where the Coonamessett begins and ends.

Those opposed to cranberry growing on the Coonamessett -- the town's lease with Handy, which has averaged about \$50,000 a year based on crop yields, expires on Dec. 31 -- contend that it is impossible to prevent farming pesticides and sand needed for cranberry growing from getting into the river. On a few occasions, including a well-publicized 1985 incident, pesticides have killed significant numbers of fish.

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"[In October], when Handy had his cranberry festival and the berries were floating, there was another minor fish kill," said Joseph Netto, an amateur fisherman and lifelong Falmouth resident. "He ended up holding the herring back to harvest the cranberries. What's more important, the right of fish to go naturally downriver, or private agribusiness on public water?"

Opponents also say the bogs, which contain numerous walking trails, are part of the town's green space, and that access is limited when pesticides are sprayed.

"I used to live on a cranberry bog in East Falmouth, and once I had children, I became aware of the amount of spraying that was going on there," said Wendi Buesseler, founder of the Coonamessett River Park Coalition, whose home abutted one of Handy's private bogs. "I was told that on town-owned bogs, the same thing goes on. We couldn't do anything about [spraying on] the privately owned bogs, but we could about the public."

Other residents contend that the Coonamessett's bogs, which constitute about a quarter of the total acreage of Falmouth's cranberry bogs, do not endanger fish or humans and are a vital part of the town's identity, providing breathtaking views along busy John Parker Road.

They point out that a cranberry vine can be found on the town seal; bogs employed the area's first Portuguese descendants more than a century ago; cranberry farming, meanwhile, is about all that remains of the town's agricultural roots.

After Falmouth's April Town Meeting voted to do away with commercial growing on the bulk of the town's bogs -- another 16 acres are expected to be phased out in four years -- Linda Davis, a former schoolteacher, founded the Falmouth Bog Preservation Group to fight to get them back. From the start, the reaction to her group was overwhelming, she said.

Handy, the Cape's largest cranberry grower, whose family has farmed the Coonamessett's bogs since the town first leased them out in 1971, also joined the fray, contending he had been unfairly blamed by environmentalists for fish kills and poor management practices. "It's become a personal attack against me, when it should be about the bogs," he said.

In 2001, Falmouth's Conservation Commission voted to terminate Handy's lease based on repeated violations over several years. Neither the Board of Selectmen nor the town administrator, who called Handy an "asset" to the town, supported the vote. While Handy, a fifth-generation farmer, defends his reputation, he said that he has not been a perfect tenant, having violated pesticide-spraying notification rules more than once in order to save his crops from fast-acting insects.

If anything, the inherent difficulties of farming cranberries on a flow-through river may make it impossible for Falmouth Town Meeting members to decide whether Handy or any grower can keep the river pesticide-free or maintain a supportive habitat for herring or trout, specialists said.

If the bogs are to stay, the town may have to live with a compromise, such as building berms to try to separate the bogs (an idea river advocates reject), or more vigorously monitoring how the bogs are farmed -- something Whritenour promises would happen with new, revised licenses.

For the first time in years, a town task force began meeting last month charged with planning for the river's future.

"This is a big property to manage, and adding the river to the mix makes it much more of a challenge," said Carolyn DeMoranville, director of the University of Massachusetts's Cranberry Station in East Wareham. "I'm not saying it can't be done, but it makes it more of a challenge."

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