

Mid-Hudson

Refuge

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Dover parcel 1st in 6-state wildlife refuge

Recreational uses to return after public comment time

JOHN FERRO
POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

DOVER PLAINS - Recreational uses are expected to remain largely unchanged and the town of Dover will see a slight increase in revenue following the acquisition of a 144-acre parcel in the town by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The Nature Conservancy has donated its Nellie Hill Preserve to the federal government. The transfer marks the official establishment of the Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge, a six-state effort to acquire and preserve grassland habitats.

Federal, state and local officials gathered at Dover Town Hall Wednesday to formally announce the transaction, which was completed in December.

In October, the Fish & Wildlife Service finalized plans to acquire — either through purchases, donations or conservation easements from willing landowners — 15,000 acres of grasslands in New York, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

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About 1,500 of those acres are targeted within Dutchess County.

The loss of shrubby habitat, or young forest, has resulted in declining populations of more than 65 songbirds, mammals, reptiles, pollinators and other wildlife that depend on it, the agency has said.

“This is the largest conservation effort in the nation,” said Wendi Weber, director of the Fish & Wildlife Service’s Northeast Region.

Wednesday’s announcement provided the first glimpse of a process that officials hope will take place repeatedly in the coming decades.

Locally, it means a brief moratorium on recreational uses at Nellie Hill. The pause is needed because federal regulations require a public-comment period prior to allowing access to newly acquired lands.

Refuge Manager Michael Horne said the comment period for all activities other than hunting will be two weeks. He expects the preserve to reopen for those uses before the end of February.

Horne said the review



Dover town Supervisor Linda French, center, applauds at the unveiling of signs marking the Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge at a ceremony at Town Hall on Wednesday.

period for hunting takes longer, in part because of safety concerns and other impacts. The parcel will likely not be reopened to hunters until 2018, he said.

The town will see a slight revenue increase as a result of the transfer, according to town Supervisor Linda French.

The parcel has been exempt from property taxes since it was purchased by the nonprofit Nature Conservancy in 1991.

Under federal ownership, however, the town will benefit from the Fish & Wildlife Service’s Refuge Revenue Sharing pro-

gram, a form of payments in lieu of taxes, albeit at a reduced rate. How much the town receives is subject to a formula determined each year by Congress, Horne said.

The Nellie Hill parcel was acquired by The Nature Conservancy from a local farming family to protect a number of rare plant species.

“By donating the property, that purpose is magnified,” said Stuart Gruskin, chief conservation officer for the nonprofit’s New York chapter. “It’s leveraged to provide additional values to both peo-

ple and nature.” The donation establishes Great Thicket as the nation’s 566th wildlife refuge.

Bill Place, 68, a Dover Plains resident, said the property will benefit from the added management resources available from the Fish & Wildlife Service.

“And it’s a huge honor to be the first property in this gigantic refuge,” he said.

John Ferro: 845-437-4816, jferro@poughkeepsiejournal.com, Twitter: @PoJoEnviro

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