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Trustees Awarded Major National Coastal Resilience Fund Grant, Doubling Size Of Innovative Restoration Project to 300 Acres of Great Marsh

Boston, Newbury, Essex & Ipswich, MA – December 5, 2019 – The Trustees of Reservations (The Trustees) is pleased to announce it has been awarded a $217,931 National Coastal Resilience Fund grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), NOAA, Shell and TransRe. The grant will fully fund an innovative salt marsh habitat restoration and climate adaptation project already underway at its Old Town Hill reservation in Newbury, and expand the trial from 115 to 300 acres, in Newbury, Essex, and Ipswich, MA.

Above: Much of the Great Marsh ecosystem has been compromised due to widespread historic ditching, an agricultural practice dating back to early colonial days and up until the early 1900s when marsh hay farming was ultimately abandoned, allowing the marsh to flood as agricultural infrastructure fell into disrepair.

The funding follows on the heels of nationally competitive awards The Trustees has already received, including $100,000 from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) grant program, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), $30,000 from the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, $80,000 in state grant funds through the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) Division of Ecological Restoration's (DER) Priority Projects Program, and a $15,740 MassBays grant that kick-started the restoration of 85 acres of salt marsh at Old Town Hill Reservation, in Newbury, last year. The area being restored includes 30 acres within a state-owned Wildlife Management Area.

"We are so grateful for the incredible support from our many partners and are encouraged by the significant investments in resilient nature-based and innovative solutions that will protect the places we love from the impacts of our changing climate," says Barbara Erickson, Trustees President & CEO. "The work we do today to test new techniques will serve as a roadmap for others working to protect critical habitats and their dependent species, as well as homes and businesses, for generations to come."

The restoration project aims to fortify 300 acres of salt marsh, which over time have been compromised by historic ditching, which destroyed natural draining processes and left the area increasingly vulnerable to floods and sea-level rise. In order to 'heal' these ditches, the Trustees and partners are using a new, nature-based method of "ditch remediation" which, to date, has only been piloted on a very limited basis on the neighboring USFWS Parker River Wildlife Refuge. The Trustees protects more than 15% of the Great Marsh, the largest coastal marsh in New England at 20,000 acres, and under increasing threat from flooding and sea level rise.

“Not only are these marshes critically important to protecting our shorelines from rising sea levels, they’re also home to globally rare and endangered species, such as the salt marsh sparrow,” says Tom O’Shea, Trustees Director of Coast and Natural Resources. “Salt marsh habitats support local ecosystems and our seafood economy, all while serving as a natural flood barrier to protect our homes, businesses, and places that we love. We’re very grateful to our partners as we work to protect this incredible resource.”

Much of the Great Marsh ecosystem has been compromised due to widespread historic ditching, an agricultural practice dating back to early colonial days and up until the early 1900s when marsh hay farming was ultimately abandoned, allowing the marsh to flood as agricultural infrastructure fell into disrepair. During the Great Depression, vast re-ditching programs were launched to drain the marsh, in some cases for mosquito control in areas viewed as swampy, nuisance land. By the late 1930s nearly 94% of New England salt marshes had been re-ditched, and today the remnants of these ditches continue to disrupt natural tidal flow.

The three to five-year restoration process will use a nature-based “healing” technique of harvesting salt hay from the marsh and layering it within approximately half of the ditched areas. The hay will then be able to trap sediment from the incoming tides and rebuild marsh “peat” naturally over time, to restore the health and natural function of the marsh.

“The Massachusetts Division of Ecological Restoration is proud to partner with The Trustees to pilot new coastal wetland restoration methods that target the legacy impacts of historic salt marsh ditching,” said DER Director Beth Lambert. ‘‘We’re excited that this grant will allow the project team to expand its efforts. We hope that this work will be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of restoration treatments that enhance salt marsh health and increase marsh resilience to sea level rise caused by climate change.”

Focus on the Great Marsh

As the largest conservation nonprofit in Massachusetts with 27,000 acres under its care, including 37 coastal sites and 120 miles of managed waterfront, The Trustees recognizes the urgent need to bolster the resilience of its properties which are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the effects of our changing climate. An extensive climate vulnerability assessment (CVA) conducted by The Trustees in partnership with The Woods Hole Group in 2017—the first of its kind by a statewide conservation nonprofit—identified coastal beaches and salt marshes as two of the most “at risk” natural areas.

Soon thereafter, The Trustees launched its “Saving the Great Marsh: Ditch Remediation, Habitat Preservation and Resiliency Building at the Landscape Scale,” project in the summer of 2018. The next phase of the project, to harvest and layer the salt marsh hay, will begin as soon as all permitting and monitoring is complete, potentially as early as December of this year. The project is estimated to take three to five years, with a goal of helping the marsh to keep pace with sea level rise so it can continue to serve as a buffer to adjacent uplands from storm surge and provide habitat for species that rely on it, including the Salt Marsh Sparrow; American Black Duck; Mallard; Green-Winged Teal; Gadwall; Greater Scaup; Common Goldeneye; Bufflehead; Red-Breasted Merganser; Canada Goose; and Atlantic Brant.

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More about The Trustees

Founded in the City of Boston by landscape architect and open space visionary Charles Eliot in 1891, The Trustees is the nation's first and the Massachusetts' largest preservation and conservation nonprofit with a mission to preserve and share places of natural and historic significance and beauty with everyone, forever. With 117 natural and historic sites located from the Berkshires to the Cape and the Islands, Trustees sites range from barrier beaches and coastal landscapes to working farms, designed landscapes and gardens, historic homesteads, and urban and community parks. Supported by generous members, donors, volunteers and supporters, The Trustees welcomes millions of residents and visitors to its properties annually and offers thousands of engaging experiences and programs designed to inspire a deeper connection to nature and the outdoors, conservation, community, and culture. www.thetrustees.org.