Invasive Common Reed Threatens Lake Huron's Coastal Environments

Common Reed — or *Phragmites australis* (frag-MY-teez) — is an alien, invasive plant with origins in Europe and Asia. Common Reed has recently found its way to some of Lake Huron's beaches and has raised much concern over its potential effects on the beach environment.

The invasive Common Reed creates tall, dense stands of grass which degrade coastal areas and wetlands by crowding out native plants and animals, blocking shoreline views, reducing access for swimming, fishing and hunting and, in addition, can create fire hazards from dry plant material. Common Reed typically grows on coastal beaches, interior wetlands, roadside ditches and other low, wet areas, although occasionally it has been found to grow in dry areas.

Common Reed typically colonizes a new area from seeds or small fragments of rhizomes (underground stems), dispersed by water, animals, machinery and humans. Once established, new stems grow from the underground rhizomes and the plant begins to spread. During the growing season, rhizomes spread horizontally in all directions and, when fragmented, readily grow into new plants.

Seeds — as well as rhizomes broken by natural actions such as waves, or human actions such as dredging, tilling or operating motorized vehicles along beaches — quickly spread and take root in new locations. Rapid expansion is also promoted by other disturbances that give this invasive plant a competitive edge, including soil disturbance and the clearing of vegetation.

— See other side

*Phragmites australis

Invasive Common Reed*

the Coastal Centre

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Threats to the Lakeshore

Stands of Common Reed on beaches act as a physical barrier, preventing the movement and exchange of sand between the beach and the dune. Some dune plants depend on sand burial as part of their ecology.

• The organic layer produced from the decay of Common Reed could change the physical structure of the sand, creating a barrier to the flow of shallow groundwater. If the local groundwater has become affected by pollution from nearby septic systems or other sources, this could increase people's exposure to pathogens in wet sand.

• Common Reed is aggressive and can displace native beach plant populations — many of which are rare species.

• It may be confused with other beneficial vegetation. Learn to distinguish Common Reed from the critically important native coastal plants before undertaking any control program.

Controlling Common Reed

• Cutting the full-grown plant is season-sensitive: it should be cut by mid-August to interrupt its flow of food reserves between the roots and the flower.

• Care must be taken to remove cut shoots to prevent their sprouting and forming new growth. To ensure that seeds are destroyed, stalks and seed heads must be either bagged and removed from the site, or burned.

• Do not disturb the rhizomes. Breaking them up may result in an increased population and encourage its spreading.

Control is best accomplished using a well-planned approach. • Check with your municipality to see if they have a Common Reed control program in place. • Herbicide use is regarded as an option of last resort. **Note that herbicide use near open water is banned and, elsewhere, is strictly controlled.** *The Pesticides Act* allows for a municipality to seek an exception for certain natural resource management projects. In order for this exception to apply, the municipality must obtain a *written letter of opinion* from a director of the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). To apply for this *written letter of opinion,* the municipality must contact its local MNR district office to initiate the application process. • In response to an application, the MNR may issue a written opinion stating that the project is needed for natural resources management and that the use of a pesticide may be necessary. • The local Conservation Authority office may also be involved with a municipal program.

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For more information about coastal conservation, contact the Lake Huron Centre for Coastal Conservation
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