

Forces unite to fight bad grass

By Rachael Warecki



*Invasive cordgrass is being removed in Foster City, Burlingame and South City.*

Various associations have come together to control the spread of invasive Spartina, or cordgrass, which has contributed to this summer's mosquito population.

Cordgrass facilitates flooding and has turned several coastal areas into mudflats since its appearance in the Bay Area. The stagnant water caused by flooding is the ideal environment for mosquitoes to lay their eggs. The prevalence of mosquito-carried West Nile Virus provides one more reason for the prevention of a cordgrass takeover.

The growth of cordgrass has been an issue in the Bay Area since the 1970s. Spartina cordgrass is not native to the region, but often thrives at the expense of local plants. Along with serving as a breeding ground for West Nile-carrying mosquitoes, the grass also has proved harmful to wildlife, most notably to the endangered clapper rail bird.

“We’re doing this because [the cordgrass is] dangerous to endangered species and is clogging up the channels to the Bay,” said James Counts, who is supervising the project in the field.

But not all cordgrass on the Peninsula is harmful. Native cordgrass is one of the plants that has suffered due to the growth of Spartina. It’s easy, however, for even the novice botanist to differentiate between the local grass and the invader: Spartina is two feet taller than the native plant.

The San Mateo County Mosquito Abatement District and the State Coastal

Conservancy's Invasive Spartina Project are just two of the groups working on containing the grass. The project receives funding from the CALFED Bay-Delta Program, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

For Foster City residents, the fight against Spartina cordgrass began Aug. 14. Workers sprayed Imazapyr, an eco-friendly herbicide, along the levee surrounding the city. The herbicide breaks down within a day, but the blue dye that's mixed in with the herbicide to indicate a treated area remains for a longer period.

Since the beginning of the week, the Invasive Spartina Project has also tackled the Burlingame area and plans to move on to South San Francisco.

"We've done over 550 acres with the helicopter," Counts said. "Over the next three or four weeks we'll be doing more ground treatment."

According to the Spartina Project's Web site, the cordgrass will invade 69,402 acres of the San Francisco Estuary if left unchecked. However, Counts estimates that the eradication program will have an effect on rehabilitating wildlife within three to four years.

For more information visit: <http://www.spartina.org/>