

CAREFUL LAND MANAGEMENT FOR HEALTHY FORESTS

By Kelly Presley, Executive Director of the Westerly Land Trust

The primary goal of the Westerly Land Trust is to permanently protect land and its natural resources for the public benefit and the well being of Westerly's natural environment. This mission of land conservation, however, is more complex than it appears. We have learned that conserving land means more than just watching over it; conserving land means actively observing and managing it to enhance and strengthen it.

To manage land properly, it is crucial to know its history and composition. Much of today's Westerly Land Trust open space land was farmed in the 1800's and early 1900's, as evidenced by the many stone walls that enclosed former pastures and the stands of uniformly aged trees that now fill the old fields. Most of these forest trees have actually grown since the 1938 Hurricane, so these woods are quite young.

Equally important to knowing the land's history and composition is recognizing issues that need to be addressed through forest management practices. For example, there have been many recent articles about forest fires caused by overgrowth of woodlands and about forests unable to regenerate themselves due to deer overgrazing on young vegetation growth.

In striving to be a good overseer of our forest land, the Land Trust has taken important steps in the past year. First, grants were secured from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to fund forest management activities. Second, a Rhode Island forester was hired to provide expertise in assessing the existing conditions of our forests, develop action plans to improve their health and work closely with contracted loggers to complete the forestry work.

With guidance and support from NRCS and the know-how of the forester, we have now prepared forestry action plans for Grills Preserve and Dr. John Champlin Glacier Park. In the upcoming months, visitors are likely to see or hear logging activity and may experience short-term disruption at these preserves.

In the 550-acre Grills Preserve, forest thinning will occur in two parcels totaling about 50 acres. The forester will identify key specimens to remain untouched: the oldest or "legacy" trees; mast trees that provide nuts for wildlife; and the healthiest trees with best growth potential if they are given sunlight and space by removing nearby trees. The remaining trees, about 25 percent, will then be removed by the logger and used as timber or firewood.

Also in Grills Preserve, a 25-acre wildlife habitat area will be created by removing all except legacy and mast trees and by piling brush and tree tops to make dense cover for small mammals and birds. Strategically placed tree tops are also effective in discouraging deer from grazing on young tree growth that will eventually regenerate the forest. This habitat area will benefit species that reside in the preserve now and also could attract New England cottontail rabbit, a now-rare species in RI.

Dr. John Champlin Glacier Park, comprised of 134 acres, will have a combined 45-acre thinning area and five-acre habitat clearing for wildlife. In recent years several mature oak trees have blown over in the preserve, and harvesting similar trees of compromised health will allow for stronger forest regrowth.

Although forestry activities in both preserves will result in noise and the temporary closure of some trails, all trails will re-open when the project is completed. Despite the short-term impacts, the benefits of this forestry work will be seen long into the future. Details about upcoming logging activity, which is expected to begin later this winter, will be posted in preserve kiosks and on our website www.westerlylandtrust.org.