

Conservancy clearing trees at Hoffman Evergreen Preserve to restore forest

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STONINGTON — Longtime Avalonia Land Conservancy volunteer Beth Sullivan hates to see any tree chopped down.

"I'm not kidding when I say it hurts my heart to see a tree go down," she said during a recent walk through Hoffman Evergreen Preserve, a nearly 200-acre wood on Route 201 in Stonington that is now closed to hikers as the conservancy takes on a tree harvesting and restoration project.

But Sullivan, who is the conservancy's steward for its Stonington properties, said the forest was becoming dangerous with dead and dying trees toppling across paths and piling up on the forest floor, creating a fire hazard. Densely packed hemlocks and oaks are blocking out the sun, and preventing lower level vegetation from growing. In some areas, pines were downed by high winds and heavy snows.

"The more you learn about a forest and how it grows, the better you understand the health of the forest," said Sullivan; she and other Avalonia members have completed programs about preservation at the University of Connecticut and the Connecticut Forest and Park Association. "The more you know, you can make educated stewardship decisions."

Last fall the land trust's board of directors approved a preservation plan on the Hoffman land and gave the go-ahead to a contract with Hull Forest Products in Pomfret Center. Hull will pay the conservancy about \$17,000 for the wood it hauls away.

The project includes clearing five or six areas and taking down individual diseased or dying trees along the miles of trails. Other trees that are crowding out the sun and are unable to thrive will also be cut. In total, about 65 out of 200 acres will be cleared.

Trees along the path are marked with blue paint. Some of the wood will be used for lumber, some sold for firewood and the rest turned into wood chips and sold to a biomass power plant in Plainfield.

The work began last week and already a huge swath of trees has been removed, as can be seen from Route 201. The project is expected to be completed by October.

With more space, seedlings will grow, and openings will be created to allow dense shrubs to flourish. The work will avoid wetlands, slopes and sensitive areas. Some dead trees, snags and stumps snags will remain for wildlife.

The Audubon Society and the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection both studied the property and support the project, Sullivan said, adding that she hopes the public will understand why the land trust is clearing some of the land.

Avalonia was founded in 1968 and now has control of some 4,000 acres in Connecticut and southwestern Rhode Island. The organization, and other groups that have been given stewardship of open space, are learning that some places should remain in their natural state while others need well-thought-out plans to keep them healthy and available for the public to enjoy.

"It's a balance," Sullivan said.

Once Hull has finished its work and removed its heavy equipment, some of the trails could reopen in the fall. "Some people don't get it, but I hope they will have the patience to see the results," she said.

Along the path, Sullivan stepped over oak trees toppled because of drought and disease and pointed upward, past dead branches jutting out from the trunks of hemlock trees growing so close together that the only green is a canopy about 100 feet up. Dead branches hang precariously above the path. From a distance could be heard the sound of machinery operating at the south end of the property — chippers, fellers and skidders clearing the land.

As Sullivan walked toward the work site, Chris Casadei, a forester for Hull, said he had spent about 80 hours with his crew walking through the preserve and figuring out which trees to keep and which to leave.

"We're doing selective clearing," he said, pointing out where gypsy moths, hemlock woolly adelgid and other insects and diseases have killed or are killing hemlocks, oaks and beech trees.

The areas that are cleared will remain in their native state and will start to regenerate, he said. Stumps and some deadwood will remain for forest creatures.

Sullivan said, "You want dead things. It's good for the wildlife." The area is home to many bird species, like the pileated woodpecker and Acadian flycatcher, and other species are expected to return.

The preserve is also home to deer, turkey, bobcats, coyotes, fishers, and owls.

As they approached an area where trees had been cleared, Sullivan smiled.

"This makes me happy," she said. "It's touched, but not destroyed. I look at this and say, I can live with it... The sun will come through and it really will make a difference."

Source: https://www.thewesterlysun.com/news/stonington/conservancy-clearing-trees-at-hoffman-evergreen-preserve-to-restore-forest/article_924edc32-c208-11e9-be3d-afce699aa453.html