

Charlotte Park and Wildlife Refuge Agricultural Units

Park Oversight Committee: Summary for June 8, 2015 Selectboard Meeting

This document is intended to provide the Selectboard with information about the use of agricultural units in the Charlotte Park and Wildlife Refuge.

Activities in the Park are governed by the Charlotte Park and Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Management Plan (June 1999). The Park Oversight Committee is directly responsible for interpreting and revising the Management Plan, for recommending policy for the Park, and for “managing the Park’s managers.” Management Plan revisions are approved by the Selectboard.

This summary includes each section of the Management Plan dealing with agriculture, followed by a Park Oversight Committee update under “Current Practices.” The Committee looks forward to incorporating the current practices into a revised management plan.

A map of Park units is provided separately.

Agriculture – General

1999 Park Management Plan, page 7

Portions of the property have been historically and are currently in agricultural use. Due to the existing soils and drainage on the property, different types of agricultural practices have been recommended for specific units. All agricultural lands (units) shall be managed in a Conservation Plan, which conforms with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) recommendations and in accordance with State of Vermont Best Management Practices. The farmer who leases the agricultural units shall be responsible for putting together a Conservation Plan. The Conservation Plan shall accompany any lease agreement to be approved by the Select Board with assistance from the Charlotte Land Trust.

General Agricultural Practices

1. Periodically review ditches in hedgerows and culverts to make sure water is able to flow for control of drainage runoff.
2. Records shall be maintained as to mowing maintenance schedule for all agricultural units. Whenever possible, when fields and meadows are in forbs, they shall be mowed beginning in mid- to late July to avoid disturbing nesting birds and white-tail deer fawns.
3. Reseed all bare soil areas in the Spring, Summer and Fall as needed.

4. Use natural herbicides or pesticides, as needed, on all agricultural units. If spraying or distribution of a herbicide or pesticide that will effect humans occurs, signage should be placed at the entrance of the park and the units sprayed closed to pedestrian use for a safe period of time so as to not cause a health issue. Records shall be maintained of all herbicide and pesticide use annually.
 5. Maintain borders of hedgerows and remove invasive plants in fields. Remove invasive exotics such as Honeysuckle on an annual basis in the hedgerow borders and overlooks. Replant with a mix of native trees, shrubs and groundcovers.
 6. Hedgerows between fields shall be maintained and enhanced for wildlife corridors. Native species shall be used to include a mix of deciduous trees, shrubs and groundcovers.
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Current Practices

Hedgerows should not be removed. The maintenance of hedgerows and borders has been undertaken by the Park Oversight Committee. In an ongoing effort, invasive plants have been removed using a variety of methods. Selective tree cutting has been done to maintain views and improve Park aesthetics. Herbicide has been used to treat cut stumps in some areas.

Nordic Holsteins, LLC and the Park Oversight Committee have worked cooperatively to achieve the short term goals and action steps identified in Attachment A of the current lease, and to implement practices that are associated with “sustainability.”

Agriculture: Crops - Corn/Grain/Legume Rotation

1999 Management Plan, page 8

Management Units: A, B, E, J, K, a portion of I

Description

These units shall be managed as cropland, principally for corn, legumes and hay. Based on the soils and composition of this landscape, these units are the best for continued active agricultural crop production.

Agricultural fields are used by various wildlife species. Small mammals, such as meadow voles and eastern cottontails, use open hay fields. White-tailed deer, striped skunks, woodchucks, wild turkeys, and raccoons feed on crops.

Management Standards for Agriculture

- Fields shall continue to function as active cropland for corn, legumes and hay.
- Crop rotation is essential to keep soil productive.

Work Plan

Agricultural Practices

1. Crops to be planted parallel to existing grades and gravel trails to reduce erosion potential.
 2. Rotate crops on a regular basis following the approved Conservation Plan.
 3. Keep fertilizer and pesticide use to a minimum. Natural methods of pest management shall be encouraged.
 4. Maintain annual records of all crops planted in units, fertilizer and pesticide use, and quantities of soil amendments.
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Current Practices

A riparian buffer has been established between Units A and B, and in the southeast corner of Unit E. This keeps farming activities out of wet areas and minimizes field runoff into the tributary that leads to Holmes Brook (which carries water to Lake Champlain at the Charlotte Beach). It also helps to prevent continued erosion (“head cut”) of the stream bed where it enters the forested area to the south.

Under the current lease, all fields have all been converted to hay. This use has reduced field erosion, minimized pesticide use, and is generally less damaging to Park trails and infrastructure than other farming activities.

The Park Committee feels that permanent hay is the best use for the Park agricultural units in the future.

Agriculture: Permanent Hay Land **1999 Management Plan, page 9**

Management Units: G, H, a portion of I

Description

Due to the heavy Vergennes soils in these units, they should remain in permanent hay lands as part of the active agricultural use on the property. This will allow for a more stable groundcover on areas that are consistently wet and/or highly erodable due to steep slopes.

The fields are used by various wildlife species. Small mammals, such as meadow voles and eastern cottontails, use open hay fields. They are also areas actively used by ground nesting birds, notably turkeys and grouse. Several avian species nest in hay fields; bobolinks, and eastern meadowlarks nest on the ground. Grains and seeds are important components in the diet of mourning doves and wild turkeys.

Management Standards for Agriculture and Wildlife

- Units shall be maintained as permanent hay fields. Use diverse seed mixes with grasses and forbs, including nitrogen fixing legumes.
- Fields shall be mowed frequently throughout the year to maintain as meadow and to prevent vegetative succession.

Work Plan

Agricultural Practices

1. Annual overplanting of a seed mix shall be done in the Spring in order to encourage a diversity of grasses and forbs.

Wildlife Practices

2. Mowing schedule for permanent hay fields shall be as needed throughout the Spring, Summer and Fall seasons, and should be coordinated with grass reproduction. Records shall be maintained as to mowing maintenance schedule needed.

Current Practices

These fields are very susceptible to erosion and should remain in permanent hay.

Agriculture: Livestock Areas

1999 Management Plan, page 10

Management Units: I, J, K, portions of H and N

Description

Several units on the property are suitable for livestock area. These units are located near the former Varney Farm barns and agricultural fields to the north, which could compliment the establishment of grazing areas.

Management Standards for Agriculture

- Units may be managed as permanent hay fields when not in use for livestock grazing.
- A plan should be developed for rotational grazing to encourage continuous rejuvenation of fields.
- Wet areas shall be fenced off to prevent livestock from breaking the sod.

Work Plan

Agricultural Practices

- Rotational grazing methods should be utilized.
 - Informational and warning signs shall be placed on all fencing that are electric charged.
 - All wet areas in Units H, I and N shall be fenced off to avoid livestock breaking the ground.
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Current Practices

The use of Park land for grazing has not been successful in the past. Fences have been too close to the trail in some locations and have not been well maintained. Fields are difficult to access and there is no good source of water. Fenced areas limit recreational uses of Park land.

The Park Oversight Committee has removed fences in Unit N and is managing this area as a wildlife meadow.

Recreation Meadows

1999 Management Plan, page 11

Management Units: C, F, L, M

Description

These units are designated as managed fields to perpetuate their open appearance utilizing herbaceous groundcovers and vegetation. Fields will be kept to a "controlled" height for passive recreational purposes.

Management Standards for Agriculture and Wildlife

- Units shall be maintained as meadow. Use diverse seed mixes with grasses and forbs, including nitrogen fixing legumes. Encourage native wildflowers.

- Fields shall be mowed frequently throughout the year to maintain as meadow and to prevent vegetative succession.

Management Standards for Recreation

- Fields shall be maintained at a consistent height to allow for passive recreational uses.

Work Plan

Agricultural Practices

1. Annual overplanting of a seed mix shall be done in the Spring in order to encourage a diversity of grasses and forbs.

Recreational and Wildlife Practices

2. Mowing schedule for meadows shall be 2 to 6 times a year, as needed, with an average desired height of 6 to 9 inches.

Current Practices

These fields are currently used for hay and have been maintained in accordance with the Park Management Plan. The fields have not required annual overplanting.

In 2014, bobolinks were seen in the field west of the trail in Units E and F. The Park Committee met with Mike LaClair of Nordic Holsteins, LLC to discuss delayed mowing of approximately 13 acres in this area. (This is on the June 8 Selectboard meeting agenda.) Establishing a grassland bird habitat area is supported by the Park Management Plan. The steep field makes mowing difficult. A mowed access to the lower field will be maintained.

Overlook

1999 Management Plan, Exhibit 3

From the Memorandum of Understanding dated May 9, 1997, between the Town of Charlotte and the Demeter Fund:

8. *The Town agrees to incorporate into the Park an approximately 25-acre tract currently in Town ownership that adjoins the Park.*
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Current Practices

The Overlook land was purchased by the Town of Charlotte in 1973-74. A grant for \$32,500 was received from the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (BOR). The grant agreement contains the following project description:

“The Town of Charlotte, Chittenden County, Vermont, will acquire approximately 25 acres, westerly of and adjacent to U.S. Route 7 in the Town of Charlotte, for protection and future limited recreational use.”

Over the last several years, trees and brush have been cut at the western end of the meadow, restoring the view of Lake Champlain and the Adirondacks and making this area accessible for future management. A brush-hogged “trail” around the perimeter of the field allows walkers, skiers and horseback riders to use this area of the Park. Keeping the field in hay allows limited recreational use.

Water runoff from Route 7 and coming through culverts from land to the east follows drainage patterns leading to tributaries to Holmes Brook.

It is important that this field be properly managed to prevent field erosion and runoff, and to allow continued recreational use required by the BOR funding. This field should be kept in permanent hay.

Other Issues Related to Agriculture

Agricultural Access

Currently, the only official access to Park land from Route 7 is by the Thorp Barn. The gate is a little less than 24 feet wide. High traffic speeds and limited visibility make the use of this access difficult. Discussion of an option for access at the Varney Farm or in another location is on hold until more progress is made in the restoration of the Varney Farm buildings.

Cooperation between Farmer and Park Oversight Committee

The current lease requires cooperation and communication between the Park Oversight Committee and the leasing farmer. Future leases should include similar provisions.