

## **Humans win round in battle with beavers Receive approval to breach dam**

By Caroline Louise Cole, Globe Correspondent | January 16, 2005

NORTH READING -- Beavers met their match in North Reading yesterday when a team of nine residents armed with picks, rakes, and garden hoes broke open a 50-foot section of a 200-foot-long beaver dam across Martins Brook near the Wilmington line.

Town officials said they were allowing the move under an emergency order to lower water levels upstream and save 300 homes around Martins Pond from flooding.

"The water is 18 inches higher than normal for this time of year and at the point in which septic tanks will flood out with the next big rain," said Janet Nicosia, who led yesterday's dam breaching effort as the president of the Martins Pond Association.

Nicosia's group has been lobbying town and state officials for months warning that unless the dam and another nearby were taken out, residents would lose their septic tanks and some lower-lying homes could flood.

North Reading is among several dozen hot spots for beavers around the state, Nicosia said, noting that the Martins Pond Association won a special \$300,000 allocation from the Legislature this fall to try several different beaver-control measures, State officials estimate that the state's beaver population has tripled since the passage of a sweeping ban on trapping in 1996.

However, Wayne Pacelle, who led the campaign banning the use of leg-hold beaver traps in Massachusetts nine years ago as president of the Humane Society of the United States, cast doubts on the state's beaver population estimates.

"No one really knows the current population because no one has done a field census," said Pacelle from his cell phone yesterday while on a trip in California. "However, we do acknowledge that there will always be conflicts between beavers and humans. When controls are necessary, we encourage nonlethal methods."

Initially the homeowners' association, with help from the town's Department of Public Works, attempted to fool the beavers by installing a pipe through the dam that was intended to allow some water to flow through.

But the beavers foiled that attempt by filling in the space for the pipe before the work could be completed. So the town brought in a trapper who removed a family of 10 beavers three weeks ago.

Gary Hunt, the chairman of North Reading's Board of Health, said he reluctantly allowed the trapping and yesterday's breach after finally being convinced the only practical solution was removing the beavers and taking out their habitat.

"Trapping means killing and I don't like seeing any animals killed," Hunt said. "But we've

had a lot of rain and it is to the point where we were concerned that we were going to have raw sewage leaching into lake, an unhealthy situation for both humans and animals."

Nicosia said the breach is the first step in a more comprehensive plan to control beavers in North Reading.

"Our next step is commissioning an aerial map of the town which will show us exactly how many beaver dams we are dealing with and what we need to do to control water levels," said Nicosia as her neighbors -- dressed in hip waders and rubber boots -- used garden tools and their bare hands to dismantle the sturdy edifice built from little more than tree limbs and mud.

But state Representative George N. Peterson Jr., a Grafton Republican who is sponsoring legislation to allow limited trapping of the large rodents, said he expects the beavers will prevail once again in North Reading.

"My prediction is that within a week another family will move in and the dam will be back," Peterson said. "They are enterprising, industrious critters who can do a lot of damage."