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## Martin oyster beds are thriving

Organizations overseeing the estuary say project a success

By Donald Rodrigue  
Special to Treasure Coast Newspapers

**MARTIN COUNTY**— The more than 30 acres of oyster beds planted in Martin and Palm Beach counties with the help of a \$4 million National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant are now thriving and reproducing on their own.

Martin County Water Quality Chief Gary Roderick says several organizations overseeing the estuary, including the South Florida Water Management District and the Florida Wildlife Research Institute, have lauded the success of the newly planted oysters.

"They told us the recruitment was very successful," he said. "They said the reefs have the highest densities since monitoring records have been kept."

The Martin County Oyster Reef restoration project was one of only four projects in Florida to be paid for by the NOAA grant. Only 50 similar projects nationwide received funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which was designed to put unemployed Americans back to work. Cleaning up the St. Lucie Estuary is one of the primary goals of the Indian River Lagoon South component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

The local project provided more than 100 temporary jobs to area workers, who planted 10 clusters of oyster patch reefs in the St. Lucie Estuary between the Roosevelt Bridge and Sewall's Point between 2009 and 2010. They were aided by dozens of volunteers, who helped plant another six acres of oyster beds near the Stuart River Walk.

Workers also planted six acres in Palm Beach County's Loxahatchee Estuary, and oyster reproduction on the man-made

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reefs in both estuaries has surpassed that of natural reefs. Mark Perry, executive director of the Florida Oceanographic Society based on Hutchinson Island, said his organization has partnered with Martin County to measure the number of oysters per square meter in the newly planted areas.

"It's improved on the man-made reef conditions versus the natural reef conditions," Perry said. "In the normal (natural) case, there are about 200 to 250 oysters per square meter. In the St. Lucie Estuary, it looks to be upwards of 300; in the Loxahatchee, they have had about 400 or 500 per square meter."

Roderick says the success of the man-made oyster patches can be partially attributed to the lack of significant freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee.

"The reason for that is we've been in a drought period, and we haven't had any major discharges since we deployed the oyster beds," he added.

Perry explained oysters can thrive in a certain amount of fresh water and the new beds would only be harmed in the case of a slow-moving hurricane or long period of heavy rain affecting the Kissimmee

River Basin.

"If you get a freshwater discharge of 28 days or more, it would kill them," he said. "If it's less than 28, they're going to survive OK."

A single oyster can filter nutrients such as nitrates and phosphates out of the water at a rate of 40 gallons per day. Experts say oysters are a good barometer of a healthy estuary and believe as much as 75 percent of the oyster population in the St. Lucie has been lost over the last 60 years.

Perry says the reefs formed by the new oyster beds not only clean up the estuary waters but also provide homes for small marine life.

"When you have about 600,000 oysters per acre, you're talking about filtering 24 million gallons a day," he said. Filtering is a good aspect, but they also support about 300 species of shrimp, crabs and other marine life."

Harvesting shellfish is currently prohibited in the St. Lucie Estuary due to contamination, and Perry hopes the new oyster beds coupled with other measures can one day change that.

"Our goal in all of this is to get the waters clean enough to be able to harvest shellfish again," he said. "We've got a long road to go to stop the discharges, get the water cleaned up and get the muck out of there."

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