

Benefits of oyster project explained at Stuart meeting

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STUART — In a Stuart Recreation Center room overlooking the St. Lucie River Wednesday night, officials and the public heard about the environmental importance of the federally funded Oyster Reef Restoration Project for the river.

Work began Monday on the \$4 million project, which will restore oyster habitats in the St. Lucie Estuary and the northwest fork of the Loxahatchee River, primarily between the Roosevelt and Evans Cray bridges. About 18,800 cubic yards of fossilized shells will be placed over 24 acres to provide habitats for oyster larva to attach and colonize as an oyster reef.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration awarded Martin County money for the project in June as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Martin County Water Quality Chief Gary Roderick said more than 100 jobs have been created for the restoration, which will take about a year to 16 months to complete.

The Stuart-based environmental consulting firm CSA International is managing the project, Fort Pierce's McCulley Marine Services is operating a barge and tug boat, and Jensen Beach's Ecological Associates Inc. is monitoring water quality.

Eighty-five percent of oyster reefs around the world have been lost, Roderick said, so he considers the restoration project an environmental necessity.

Martin County coastal engineer Kathy Fitzpatrick said she was proud Martin County was one of 50 areas selected from 800 applicants for federal stimulus money, and she credited various public officials and local environmentalists for writing letters of support to boost the county's application.

Many of them, including state Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, state Rep. William Snyder, R-Stuart, and a representative from the office of state Rep. Adam Fetterman, D-Port St. Lucie, were on hand to celebrate the project Wednesday.

"I can't help but think that (the St. Lucie River) is the lifeblood of the Treasure Coast," said Snyder. "It's the spawning grounds for our sports fisherman industry. We need oysters in the river."

Jacqui Thurlow, commissioner for Sewall's Point, echoed Snyder's sentiments.

"Sewall's Point is surrounded by the St. Lucie River and the Indian River Lagoon," Thurlow said. "Historically, that's why people came here, whether it was the Indians