

## Federal stimulus money equals 4 million clams ending up in St. Lucie River

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STUART — Put simply, 4 million clams buys you 30 million pounds of oyster shells.

It also pays to strategically place the shells at just the right spots in the lower St. Lucie River to create a system of patch reefs to help repopulate the estuary's oyster population — not too shallow, not too deep, not in so much muck that they'll disappear.

Thanks to \$4 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, contractors hired by Martin County began building the oyster shell reefs Aug. 24. The project, which also includes similar but smaller reefs in the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River downstream from Jonathan Dickinson State Park, will take between a year and 18 months to complete.

Because money for the project is part of the federal economic stimulus package, county officials said at least 100 jobs would be created or enhanced. Continental Shelf Associates International, a Stuart environmental consulting firm, is managing the project; McCulley Marine Services of Fort Pierce is operating the barge and tug boat; and Ecological Associates Inc. of Jensen Beach is monitoring water quality in the areas where the reefs are being built.

Oysters once thrived in the St. Lucie, but in less than a century the river has lost about 75 percent of its living oyster bed acreage. Because oyster larvae like to attach themselves to shells, the best way to get new oysters is with old oysters.

The project calls for groups of patch reefs, each 30 feet in diameter, to be placed at several sites in the St. Lucie between the Roosevelt Bridge and the Hell's Gate area at the tip of Sewall's Point.

Gary Roderick, Martin County environmental quality chief, compared setting out the patch reefs in the river to setting out sprigs of zoysia grass in your lawn: "Once you get the reefs started, they thrive and they spread."

A healthy oyster population makes for a healthy estuary. A single oyster can filter nutrients out of the water at a rate of 40 gallons per day. When the new reefs are fully populated with oysters, said Kathy FitzPatrick, coastal engineer for Martin County, they will be able to filter all the water in the St. Lucie Estuary in about a month.

Oyster reefs also provide habitat for other species, including shrimp, clams, crabs, snails and several species of fish.

Roderick put aside concerns that money spent on reefs to repopulate oysters in the estuary would be wasted if there's another large freshwater release from Lake Okeechobee like the one after last year's Tropical Storm Fay. That release combined with freshwater runoff from the river's watershed to virtually wipe out the St. Lucie's oysters.

The threat of releases makes the reefs all the more necessary, he said.

"More oyster shell (in the estuary) will result in more larval attachment sites," he said, "which will result in greater numbers of restored oysters and faster recovery of oyster beds."