

Loxahatchee River Oyster Reef Restoration Construction Begins

On Monday, June 21, crews will begin work to restore nearly 5 acres of oyster reefs within the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River.

The restoration project is coordinated and implemented by a partnership between Martin County and the Loxahatchee River District. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) provided funding as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The project will fulfill one of the specific goals of the Restoration Plan of the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River.

The Oyster Reef Restoration Project involves the placement of approximately 30 million pounds of limestone rock and shell (cultch) in the St. Lucie Estuary and Loxahatchee River to provide the critical habitat that oysters need to thrive. Contractors will use heavy equipment on barges to deploy a 6-inch layer of rock and shell. Last winter, CSA International, Inc. (CSA), a marine environmental consulting firm based in Stuart, provided project management for 21 acres of oyster reef created in the St. Lucie Estuary. Construction on the Loxahatchee portion of the project is scheduled to take approximately 6 weeks.

The deployed rock and shell will create the foundation for healthy oyster reefs. Larval oysters from the naturally occurring oysters in the river will settle onto the rock and shell creating new living oyster reefs. A pilot study conducted over the past 2 years by the Loxahatchee River District has demonstrated excellent results.

Oyster reefs are one of the most valuable habitats in the river, providing important benefits to the overall health of the estuary by cleaning water, stabilizing shorelines, and providing essential fish habitat. Oysters are remarkable filter feeders that improve water quality by removing algae and other particles directly from the water as they pump water through their gills. In fact, a single large oyster can filter upwards of 20 to 50 gallons of water per day. Once mature, the 5 acres of new oyster reef can filter approximately 100 million gallons of water per day!

Oyster reefs are also incredibly rich habitats that are home to over 300 species of fish, crabs, shrimp, and other small aquatic species. These new reefs will provide a fertile feeding ground for juvenile fish like snapper, grouper, and snook.

For 39 years, the Loxahatchee River District has been leading river protection, research and monitoring, and restoration efforts. For more information about the oyster restoration program and the activities of the Loxahatchee River District, please visit www.oysterrestoration.com and www.loxahatcheeriver.org.