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Oyster Reef Restoration Project reaches half-way mark in the St. Lucie Estuary

Stuart, Fla. (November 13, 2009) The Oyster Reef Restoration Project has hit a milestone - more than 50 percent of the oyster reefs planned for installation in the St. Lucie Estuary have been completed. "Monitoring and research projects are just beginning at the new oyster reef sites and we are already seeing colonization by oysters and several other species typical of oyster reefs," said Ben Harkanson, Project Scientist, CSA International.

Construction in the St. Lucie Estuary began in August 2009 and should be complete in early 2010. The project involves the placement of over 30 million pounds of cultch in the St. Lucie Estuary and Loxahatchee River. The cultch, which is comprised of fossilized shell, limestone rock, and recycled concrete rubble, is being used to construct a series of patch reefs that will provide habitat for oyster colonization. More than half of the 20.7 acres of patch reefs planned for restoration in the St. Lucie Estuary have been installed. Once complete, construction will begin on 3.45 acres of oyster reef habitat in the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River.

The oyster reefs are being installed in locations in the St. Lucie Estuary that provide suitable conditions for the placement of cultch and for oyster spawning. In fact, most of the sites are locations where oyster reefs were historically found. "These sites have an

appropriate salinity range to support oyster growth and are in shallow areas, which favor oyster reef development,” Harkanson added.

The oyster population in the estuaries has been negatively impacted by the lack of available substrate (hard surfaces for the oysters to attach to and grow). Erosion, runoff, and freshwater releases have resulted in layers of muck that have covered historical oyster beds making them unsuitable for oyster colonization. The creation of new reefs will provide greater surface area for oyster colonization.

About the Oyster Reef Restoration Project

The Oyster Reef Restoration Project involves the placement of approximately 30 million pounds of cultch (fossilized shell, limestone rock, recycled concrete rubble which are hard materials designed to provide points of attachment for oysters) within the St. Lucie Estuary and the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River to provide critically needed habitat so that oysters can repopulate the estuaries.

Oyster habitat is crucial to the health of our estuaries, effectively filtering nutrients, fine sediments and toxins from the water. Just one adult oyster can filter between 20 and 50 gallons of water per day. The newly constructed reef habitat, when fully populated with oysters, could filter an amount equal to the total volume of the St Lucie Estuary in about a month.

Oyster reefs also provide essential habitat structure for many other forms of marine life including shrimp, clams, crabs, snails and a variety of recreationally important fish such as gag grouper, gray snapper, redfish, and sheepshead.

The project, funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, takes a significant step toward the

fulfillment of one of the goals of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) and is being implemented by Martin County's Engineering Department.

An educational Web site has been created to keep the public informed and updated on the progress of the restoration efforts. www.oysterrestoration.com

For more information, contact Martin County's Engineering Department at 772-772-221-1387.

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