

# Oyster reef restoration project under way

By staff report

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STUART — Truckloads of cultchfossilized shells, coral and other biogenic materials used to make oyster beds are making their way to Martin County this week.

The Oyster Reef Restoration Project will restore oyster reef habitat in the St. Lucie and Loxahatchee estuaries.

The project, funded through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration by 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 and will be implemented by Martin County's Water Quality and Coastal Divisions.

"We are thrilled to have secured federal stimulus funds that will be used to provide many environmental and economic benefits to the citizens of Martin and Palm Beach counties," Martin County Coastal Engineer Kathy FitzPatrick said.

Oyster habitat is critical to the health of 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 the total volume of the St Lucie Estuary in about a month. Oyster reefs also provide essential habitat structure for other species including shrimp, clams, crabs, snails and many species of fish.

"The Oyster Reef Restoration Project will improve water quality and create and improve oyster habitat that is vital to the overall health of the St. Lucie and Loxahatchee Rivers," Martin County Water Quality Chief Gary Roderick said.

This project will provide over 100 jobs ranging from marine construction to scientific research.

One of the first steps in the project is to secure the materials necessary to construct more than 1,200 oyster reefs. Monday, trucks were on the road delivering cultch from Punta Gorda to the project's staging area northwest of the old Roosevelt Bridge.

Employees from CSA International, the environmental consulting firm managing the restoration project, will also be out on the water surveying areas in the Loxahatchee and St. Lucie rivers to continue gathering data to firm up locations for the oyster beds.

Construction is scheduled to begin in the St. Lucie Estuary during the week of Aug. 17. McCulley Marine Services will be operating the barge and tug. Ecological Associates Inc. of Jensen Beach will be conducting turbidity monitoring in the areas where the activities are occurring.

Martin County will provide more information about the project during an open house scheduled Sept. 2, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Stuart Recreation Center on Flagler Street. For more information, contact Martin County's Engineering Department at (772) 219-4930.

