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NOAA ANNOUNCES $867,853 FOR SOUTHEAST FISHERY HABITAT RESTORATION

Projects in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina & Texas

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced awards totaling $867,853 for ten local organizations in the southeastern United States to facilitate restoration of coastal and marine habitat critical to fishery resources. The projects are funded by the Community-based Restoration Program within the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries). NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The awards were made on a competitive basis through NOAA's Community-based Restoration Program (CRP) and will support projects in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. Staff from the NOAA Restoration Center and NOAA Fisheries southeast region work closely with awardees to implement projects with community volunteers. Projects involve community members in hands-on activities from initial construction to monitoring and maintenance, all of which promotes stewardship and a heightened appreciation for living marine resources.

"Protecting and restoring essential fish habitat is critical to our efforts to manage the nation's fisheries, and I am excited and pleased with NOAA Fisheries' involvement with these projects," said Dr. Roy Crabtree, NOAA Fisheries southeast regional administrator.

The following projects were awarded habitat restoration funds:

Gulf Coast Wide

- NOAA awarded $192,500 to the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission to support local-state-federal programs in Texas, Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi to remove lost or abandoned crab traps from the coastal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Each year thousands of crab traps are lost or abandoned in the Gulf and these traps continue to fish, impact benthic habitats, and present an entanglement hazard to sea turtles and marine mammals. The derelict trap removal efforts will be completed mainly with volunteers and agency staff at approximately 70 sites throughout the Gulf region.

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Alabama

- NOAA awarded $51,855 to the City of Orange Beach to build several reefs out of shucked oyster shell in order to restore important hard bottom habitat for oyster spat settlement in Wolf Bay. Volunteers will collect shell from local restaurants, bag the shell in wide mesh bags and deploy the bags in a reef formation. Local organizations, volunteers and a consulting firm have committed matching funds and in-kind services for this project.

Georgia

- NOAA awarded $29,375 to University of Georgia Marine Extension Service to restore several oyster reefs in the greater Savannah area. Volunteers will be recruited to establish oyster shell recycling centers and to promote shell recycling to the public and seafood restaurants. The University of Georgia has committed matching funds in support of this project.

South Carolina

- NOAA awarded $50,123 to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to evaluate the success of intertidal oyster restoration in South Carolina. NOAA has supported the South Carolina Oyster Restoration and Enhancement Program (SCORE) for several years. SCORE has been highly successful at motivating a large volunteer effort (currently more than 900 volunteers) to collect shucked oyster shell and use it to construct reefs for oyster spat settlement. The goal of the current funding is to utilize a portion of this volunteer base to aid in the scientific evaluation of reef success. Improved site selection may become possible with a more complete understanding of the many factors that can influence the success of an individual reef. An additional $50,063 has been committed in the form of in-kind services, state of South Carolina staff, and community volunteers.

Texas

- NOAA awarded $200,000 to Ocean Trust to restore 11,000 acres of once-productive fishery habitat in the Bahia Grande, between Brownsville and Port Isabel, Texas. By cutting dry channels to connect the Bahia Grande to Laguna Larga and Little Laguna Madre, the complex will be prepared for the re-introduction of tidal water from San Martine Lake, to the southwest, and the Brownsville Ship Channel, to the south.

Florida

- NOAA awarded $34,000 to Tampa Electric Company (TECO) to restore 11.9 acres of estuarine wetland on Tampa Bay. Invasive exotic plants will be removed from the entire tract to allow for the construction of tidal creeks and ponds as well as planting of native species. It is estimated that the restored site will be visited by approximately 175,000 visitors a year due to its location adjacent to the TECO Manatee Viewing Center public outreach facility.

- NOAA awarded $30,000 to Wildlife Research Team, Inc., a non-profit volunteer-based education foundation in Miami-Dade County, to clear tidal passageways through the mangrove forests in Matheson Hammock Park. These tidal passageways were clogged with large amounts of debris from Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and are unavailable as vital nursery and forage grounds to young fish, sea turtles and invertebrates. The debris will be removed by volunteers using canoes and manual labor as an alternative to the use of large machinery, which can damage these sensitive habitats.

- NOAA awarded $50,000 to the Florida Gulf Coast University to restore oyster reefs in the western Everglades watershed, specifically the Caloosahatchee estuary, Estero Bay and Henderson Creek. The goal of this project is to use scientific data to select appropriate sites for oyster restoration. Community volunteers will bag shucked oyster shells and deploy them in suitable habitat for oyster spat settlement.

- NOAA awarded $50,000 to the Ecosystem Restoration Support Organization, Inc., a Florida panhandle non-profit organization, to create 13 acres of combined saltmarsh and seagrass habitat and 14 acres of oyster reef along the shoreline of Pensacola Bay. Volunteers will participate in planting saltmarsh grasses and will collect oyster spat on recycled shell for placement on the created reef.

- NOAA awarded $180,000 to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve to restore natural tidal flushing between Johnson Bay and Tarpon Bay in Collier County, Florida. This hydrologic restoration project will reconnect the 600 acres of the two bays by dredging out the silt and installing two culverts and one bridge, thus restoring the historical flow.

NOAA's Community-based Restoration Program has been helping community organizations develop and implement habitat restoration projects of local priority since 1996. The NOAA-funded projects provide strong on-the-ground habitat restoration components that offer educational and social benefits for people and their communities, in addition to long-term ecological benefits for fishery resources. More than 150 projects in the southeast region have been implemented using NOAA funding to leverage state and local contributions. Community involvement, a key component of the program, enhances stewardship that will be critical to improving future conservation practices.

NOAA Restoration Center personnel are available for advice and direction in project development and implementation. More information on the CRP and future funding opportunities can be found at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. To learn more about NOAA, please visit http://www.noaa.gov.