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News

Oysters planted in Tred Avon River

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Pier owners grew spat in cages made by inmates

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OXFORD Talbot County's waterfront property owners who volunteered last year to tend oyster cages from their private piers saw the results of their efforts Tuesday as the oysters were collected and planted in a sanctuary in the Tred Avon River.

The oysters were grown through Gov. Martin O'Malley's Marylanders Grow Oysters program. It is managed by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Oyster Recovery Partnership. The spat (baby oysters) are provided by the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Studies hatchery at Horn Point and the DNR Piney Point hatchery in St. Mary's County. Cages are provided by DNR and inmates at the Maryland Department of Corrections.

In the program's first year, 177 pier owners along the Tred Avon River tended oyster spat in 858 cages.

"I am very pleased at the success of Marylanders Grow Oysters," said Gov. Martin O'Malley in a statement. "Our citizen stewards in Talbot County have not only done a terrific job giving these baby oysters a head start on life, but they also have been a source of inspiration for other conservation minded Marylanders."

About half a million oysters are estimated to be planted in the sanctuary at the end of the Oxford Cooperative Laboratory pier. The quarter-acre square is marked in the water by four buoys with red flags and is already home to some natural oysters. Volunteers, watermen and members of Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Oyster Recovery Partnership worked all day to gather oysters from each pier and move them to the sanctuary.

The newly planted eastern oysters are almost a year old and a little more than an inch long. Oysters are full grown at about two years old when they get to about three inches long.

"These were grown to enhance the sanctuary, not to enhance people's appetites," said Chris Judy, biologist with the DNR Shellfish Program. "They will be used to enhance a viable, but sparsely populated sanctuary."

Marylanders Grow Oysters was launched in September 2008 at the Ratcliff Manor Road home of Hope and Anthony Harrington. O'Malley's program is aimed at restoring the oyster population in the Chesapeake Bay tributaries. Oysters, along with mussels, sea squirts and barnacles, are filter feeders that eat algae. Oysters can filter about 50 gallons of water an hour and they provide habitat for crabs, striped bass and other animals, said Stephan Abel, executive director of the ORP.

This fall, the program will expand, putting 5,000 cages in 11 other creeks and rivers, including La Trappe and San Domingo Creeks.



PHOTO BY ROXANE DOSTER WATTS

With cameras aimed at them to record the historic moment, from left, Talbot County Engineer Roy Clarke, John Harrison of Grasonville, Bailey Ulbricht of Severna Park, Megan Watts of St. Michaels and Secretary of the DNR John Griffin pour the first oysters onto the Oyster Sanctuary in the Tred Avon River.

Each tributary's program will be coordinated by a local group, from "neighbors to long standing environmental organizations," Judy said. The Tred Avon will again be organized by the Talbot County Department of Public Works. Environmental Concern will work with Talbot County to lead at La Trappe and San Domingo Creeks.

"Talbot County has been crucial in organizing and helping us," Judy said.

Ray Clarke, director of Talbot Department of Public Works, said it was a lot of work contacting property owners and distributing cages but they have been receptive and this year should be a little smoother as the property owners are familiar with the process.

"It is interesting to see the oysters recovered," he said. "We're excited the program is about to expand ... hopefully it will expand to all Talbot County creeks."

Managers learned a lot during the first year and may tweak some things as the program enters its second year.

"Initially we got lots of calls and emails," Judy said. "It started with people calling and saying they couldn't see the oysters and they thought they were dead. We told them to wait a month or two. The spat are small, the size of the head of a pin so they are hard to see."

Then there were questions about other creatures getting into the cages. Homeowners found the cages attracted shrimp, crabs and fish and that is OK, Judy said.

In the winter months, when there was ice on the water, growers wanted to know if they should do anything. Submerged cages are OK, but spat in exposed cages can freeze and die.

Cages also will be made a little smaller so they are easier to manage, Judy said.

In about a month, volunteers will get new spat distributed by local coordinators.

"It is annual commitment of nurturing and planting. It is a continuous program," Judy said.

There is room in the Tred Avon sanctuary for another two or three years. The oysters can only be planted in a few patches on the lab's property where there is a hard shell bottom.

"After that, you need another sanctuary," Judy said.

Michael Klein of Oxford said he plans to participate again.

"I thought it was fun," he said. "I've lived in Maryland my whole life. Clearly the Bay is deteriorating. It is critically important to clean the Bay."

The cost for each cage is about \$15 including labor and materials. There is no cost to property owners or coordinators. Funding for the program comes from the DNR and ORP.

"It's well worth the expense," said John Griffin, DNR secretary. "This is the Governor's first signature citizen stewardship project and it's great to see the results. There's a lot of pent up demand and concern to see such a grassroots effort."

Partners include the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Talbot County Public Works, Environmental Concern, the Chesapeake Bay Trust and other local watershed advocacy groups.

Other larger-scale restoration efforts are underway with additional participation from NOAA, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Maryland Waterman's Association and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Since 2000 the ORP has planted nearly 2 billion oysters on 1,200 acres. This year about 450 million oyster spat were planted on shell.

Information on Marylanders Grow Oysters and Marylanders Plant Trees is available at the State's Smart, Green & Growing Web site: www.green.maryland.gov.

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