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Contact: Bob Lewis
(301) 240-6047

SMRWA Plants Homegrown Oysters, Invites Public to Oyster Reef Groundbreaking

Volunteers braved the morning chill on Sunday, Nov. 4 to help plant 2.2 million oysters on a 5-acre plot in the St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary. The team of 25, comprised of St. Mary's Watershed Association (SMRWA) members, local watermen, St. Mary's College of Maryland students, and local elementary and high school students, made quick work of relocating the 830 bags of spat on shell.

In its ongoing effort to get more pollution-filtering oysters into the river, the group grew these oysters from scratch, so to speak, with a student-led oyster nursery project during the summer.

Coordinators Allison Rugila and Paula Riner worked with locally owned Shore Thing Shellfish, LLC to set up and



Nov. 4 planting of 2.2 millions oysters into the St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary. Photo by Carrie Munn.

maintain a tank in which oyster larvae was released onto shell, and once attached, moved by the bagfuls under the pier at the College waterfront. Numerous volunteers jumped in to help with the intensive work required to see the five week long project to fruition.



Ethan Snyder assists Capt. Craig unloading shell bags.

Rugila was among the volunteers Sunday, ripping open bags and placing millions of homegrown oysters in their new home, where they will be studied further and contribute to a cleaner watershed.

"This planting is a stepping stone in the watershed's restoration," she said, happy to see the hard work paying off with remarkable spat on shell counts and a large volume of healthy oysters to work with. SMRWA Executive Director Bob Lewis commented the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was very interested in this project, a real-time experiment where the group, in conjunction with the College, is using a variety of techniques and assessing variables in the bivalves' ability to thrive.



“We’re really putting emphasis on the living classroom idea,” he said, explaining how projects like the nursery tank and the continued research at the sanctuary are helping gain a better understanding of best practices for growing a sustainable oyster population.

SMRWA is hosting a groundbreaking celebration of the first-ever three-dimensional reef in the St. Mary’s River on Saturday, Nov. 10 at the back lawn of the Muldoon River Center at the College. The public is invited to join the group riverside at this free event from Noon until 3 p.m. Grilled oysters and hot dogs will be available and the ceremony will be promptly at 1 p.m.



Fifteen volunteers work to plant oysters while Capt. Craig Kelley maneuvers the barge over the desired location ensuring even distribution on the bottom. Photo by Merideth Taylor.