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Fishermen spread shells to restore habitat

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David Gaskill spreads oyster shells Tuesday to help restore oyster habitat near Cedar Island while Jerry Gaskill pilots the boat. The shell planting is part of a restoration project involving local fishermen, N.C. Coastal Federation and N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries. (Mike Shutak photo)

CEDAR ISLAND — Clear skies and calm waters made it easy Tuesday for local fishermen to spread oyster shells to restore oyster habitat near this Down East community.

The fishermen were working with the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) and the N.C. Coastal Federation (NCCF) as part of a project funded by a \$5 million federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant awarded to the federation.

The DMF is paying commercial fishermen \$2 per bushel to spread 41,000 bushels of oyster shell in this county, as well as Hyde, Pender and New Hanover counties from now until July 31.

Oysters are filter feeders, straining particles from the water to eat. This makes them an important part of water quality, cleaning the water as well as providing habitat, through oyster reefs, for juvenile marine creatures to live. Oyster habitat has been lost over time due to things such as diseases, like dermo, and pollution, like stormwater.

Oysters grow by attaching themselves to hard surfaces. One of their preferred places to grow is on the shells of other oysters. By spreading oyster shells on the bottom, the DMF, NCCF and local fishermen are providing additional habitat for baby oysters to attach and grow.

At Rebecca Goodwin's home in Cedar Island, a front-loader was used to fill dozens of bushel baskets with oyster shell the DMF had purchased for the project.

While the division does have an oyster shell-recycling program that brings in from 25,000-30,000 bushels of shell per year, for the day's project the NCCF purchased several hundred bushels of oyster shells from an oyster company in Virginia. The federation still purchases shells for the project because the DMF's recycling program cannot bring in the shells fast enough to meet the demands of the current project.

The baskets were then loaded into shallow bottom skiffs belonging to commercial fishermen Jerry Gaskill, David Gaskill and Paula and Bobby Bright. These fishermen took the shells out to a designated rebuilding site, where DMF technician Joe Galatio directed them as they spread the shells.

Secretary Dee Freeman of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) was at the launch site Tuesday. He said now is an interesting time in the state and that the economy demands our attention.

"There's hope we can keep jobs while keeping fisheries open," he said. "The work being done here today is very important to the economy and the environment. This will go down in history as one of the most challenging economic times."

Numerous fishermen practice oyster harvesting, especially during lean seasons in the winter when not many other seafood species are available. Craig Hardy, director of the DMF Oyster Shell Recycling Program, said they've seen an increase in oyster population since 2000 and early 2001.

"The recruitment is good," he said, "and I think we'll see good landings this year...we've been seeing a lot more effort (harvesting shellfish) and fortunately, we've had the resources to support it." The DMF will receive all their landing reports in about two months.

Mr. Freeman said since he became head of the department, he's begun a new plan that involves building partnerships. This project, on which the DMF has partnered with local fishermen, the NCCF and UNC-Wilmington, is an example of the kinds of partnerships he intends to build.

Mrs. Bright was supportive of the efforts to restore oyster habitat. She said the project is adding oysters to the state's waters.

"We've been clamming and oystering for years," she said, referring to herself and her husband. "Me for 13 years, my husband for over 20. We believe this is good for the community and provides oysters for fishermen."

Oyster restoration has been going on in North Carolina for several decades, as far back as the 1950s. The DMF discovered oysters grew well in shallow-bottom areas, but the division's boats were too large to get back to them. This is why they chose to hire local fishermen to spread the shells in their shallower-draft boats.

The DMF has hired commercial fishermen to help with their projects in the past. Fishermen have been paid to relay oysters out of polluted areas and purge them on their own shellfish bottom leases. Patricia Smith,

DMF public information officer, said that while no other projects involving hiring local fishermen are planned at this time, it is possible more may occur in the future.

For more photos, see the photo gallery on this site.

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