

* * * * * PRESS RELEASE * * * * *

For immediate release - June 18, 2010: Contact person Bob Lewis 301-862-3517

250,000 oysters help clean St. Mary's River

When St. George Island resident Carroll "Mike" Milburn woke up on June 13th, he expected his Sunday to be a day of rest and spiritual renewal. Those thoughts did not last long. Just after seven o'clock he heard a knock on his door. More than a dozen volunteers were waiting for a captain and workboat to help them plant oysters in the St. Mary's River. Milburn agreed to help out and with a vessel provided by Golden Eye Seafood, he fired up the 115 horsepower Yamaha engine and departed Piney Point for a day of oyster planting.

Earlier that morning, volunteers had been gathering together more than 300 cages of yearling oysters from forty-seven private piers in creeks and coves throughout southern St. Mary's County. Volunteers had cared for the baby oysters, called "spat," since last September and it was now time to deposit the young oysters into the wild where they could mature, breed, and clean the water.



Retired waterman Carroll "Mike" Milburn steers a workboat filled with cages containing year-old oysters toward a planting site in the proposed St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary.

Milburn piloted the workboat to five central collection locations: St. George Island, Martin's Point, St. Mary's College, Lucas Cove, and upper St. Inigoes Creek. At each location volunteers loaded cages of oysters into the workboat for the trip north to the proposed upper St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary. On arrival the oysters were scattered onto an existing, but depleted, oyster bar where they will continue to feed and grow.

Oysters are filter feeders and can remove algae and pollutants from the water column and place them into the bottom sediments. An adult oyster can filter 55 gallons of water each day. While the baby oysters will need to grow another two or three years before reaching adult size, they are already filtering and cleaning the St. Mary's River, albeit a bit slower. It takes about fifty half dollar-size yearling oysters working together to filter the amount of water that one adult oyster can filter.



“Over the past week, we’ve planted 250,000 year-old oysters into the river,” said St. Mary’s River Watershed Association executive director Bob Lewis. Lewis estimates that together these newcomers to the river will filter nearly a quarter of a million gallons of water every day. “It’s a beginning,” Lewis added. “We will be planting another 500,000 oysters in August.”

But that’s not all. In September, the cages will again be filled with 450,000 week-old spat and returned to volunteer foster parents thus beginning the program over again. Supported by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources via the Marylanders Grow Oysters project, one hundred dock owners will care for 650 cages of oysters through their first vulnerable year of life.

“We all know that the oyster is key to the health of the St. Mary’s River. Long ago, oysters filtered all of the river’s water every day,” said Association president Joe Anderson. “Today the St. Mary’s River is one of only two places in the entire Chesapeake Bay where oysters are breeding naturally. Still the population of oysters in the St. Mary’s is less than 5% of what it was just fifty years ago.”



Volunteer John Fulchiron dumps oysters overboard as Capt. Mike Milburn looks on.

One hundred years ago, there were more than 500 commercial fishermen working in St. Mary’s County. Today there are less than ninety, and only twelve who harvest oysters in the St. Mary’s River.

“Bottom line is we want to clean up the river—make it swimmable and fishable in every creek and cove,” Lewis said. “Oysters can do that and more. With a thriving population of oysters in the upper river sanctuary, we anticipate that oysters will regain a foothold throughout the lower river and into the Potomac River. That means more jobs for watermen.”

The St. Mary’s River Watershed Association is looking for volunteers with docks in the St. Mary’s River to grow oysters in cages beginning in September. Growers should have four feet of water and will need to tend to the oysters weekly for about ten months. If you would like to participate, email info@stmarysriver.org. The program is supported by Boeing Global Corporate Citizen, Constellation Energy, and DNR’s Marylanders Grow Oysters.

“This is going to make a big difference,” said Captain Mike Milburn. “These oysters will take off, and within five years I’ll bet there’s oysters growing everywhere.”

* * * * *