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## 115,000 oysters released into the St. Mary's River sanctuary

The Marylanders Grow Oysters annual collection of ten-month-old spat began in the early hours of May 28<sup>th</sup> along the shores of the St. Mary's River and ended the following day when all 115,000 oysters had been release into the wild.

Thirty volunteers in small skiffs and trucks collected 650 cages from docks around the tidal waters and then planted the oysters in the St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary.

"This year's planting will augment the work we did last year," said Bob Lewis, project leader and executive director of the St. Mary's River Watershed Association.

Combined the two plantings total 365,000 oysters and even at their current youthful size, Lewis claims they will have a big impact on water quality.

"That's a powerful all-natural water treatment plant," Lewis said of the newly refurbished half-acre oyster reef and planting site.

Especially in the early spring and summer, excess nutrients enter our waterways and feed blooms of algae that block sunlight from bottom dwelling plants. As the algae die off, sink, and decompose, oxygen is depleted from the water causing life-threatening conditions known as hypoxia. Living organisms must leave the area to find life-sustaining oxygen. The result is a dead zone—an area with no living organisms.



*Aboard the Linda Jo, volunteers Capt. John Fulchiron, John Giusti, and Emily Sillcox collect oyster cages from local piers before planting them into the St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary.*



Oysters are vegetarians, filtering and digesting algae from the water column. In the process they also take up suspended particulates from the water, producing a clearer and cleaner aquatic environment. A mature oyster (about 3 years old) can filter approximately 55 gallons of water every day. More oysters means less algae and that can lead to smaller dead zones.

“The oysters we planted last year have survived and grown considerably, said Lewis. “Now with the additional spat, we’ve got this ½ acre system revved up and filtering about 7 ½ million gallons every day!

“And the best part—that number continues to grow daily just as the oysters grow,” Lewis added.

It started last September when college student volunteers filled 650 cages with one-week-old oysters (also known as spat) and then distributed them to 97 volunteer homeowners who cared for them at their piers during the oysters’ first and most vulnerable year of their life. With the year nearly over, it was time to collect and move the thriving oysters from the cages to the wild.

The Marylanders Grow Oysters program, supported by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Oyster Recovery Project, allows waterfront homeowners to participate directly in oyster restoration efforts. Oyster restoration is considered by experts to be the most important effort currently underway in the overall clean up of the Chesapeake Bay. The program improves water quality, enriches the ecosystem by increasing vital habitats, and promotes stewardship.

The Association’s next oyster restoration project will be on August 27 when St. Mary’s College incoming students will plant one million spat. Local volunteers will assist in this project. The public is invited to witness this exciting event at the college’s waterfront.

Opportunities to get everyone involved in oyster restoration abound whether it be refilling and redeploying MGO oyster cages, surveying and mapping natural bars, helping out at an oyster planting, or lending a hand with fundraising and administration.

The Marylanders Grow Oysters in the St. Mary’s River program will launch its third year on September 17 when all the cages will be refilled with a new brood of spat and then redistributed to homeowners. The St. Mary’s River Watershed Association is always looking to have new waterfront homeowners become part of the Marylanders Grow Oysters program. In order to qualify for stewarding cages, docks are required to have four feet of water and the homeowner must be willing to care for the oysters for a period of 10 to 12 months. If you would like to participate, email [info@stmarysriver.org](mailto:info@stmarysriver.org). The program is supported by Boeing Global Corporate Citizen.

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