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## Big Bend Shellfish Trail official opening set for Oct. 21



**These orange and blue clam baskets show some of the bountiful harvest from Cedar Key.**

*Photo by UF/IFAS*

### **Information and Photo Provided**

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**BRONSON** -- The official opening of the Big Bend Shellfish Trail and ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled to be during the 48th Annual Cedar Key Seafood Festival, Oct. 21 at 1 p.m. in the Cedar Key City Park Pavilion.

The public is invited to participate in this historic event.

The Levy County Board of County Commissioners received a grant award of \$20,000 from The Conservation Fund to produce The Big Bend Shellfish Trail Map. One of five collaborative grants awarded across the Big Bend counties—Dixie, Jefferson, Levy, and Taylor counties -- this funding encourages partnerships to strengthen the region's economic vitality while simultaneously ensuring the ongoing health of its natural resources.

“A number of partners participated in the creation of Florida’s first Shellfish Trail Map and the largest trail of its kind in the United States. This project will showcase our working waterfront communities and encourages economic growth in Levy County and in the Big Bend Region,” Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks said.

Over the past two years, Levy County Visitors Bureau implemented the project by developing a map and website that features a section of the Big Bend region that includes Levy, Dixie, Taylor and Jefferson counties.

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The trail will provide people with information about where to buy and eat local shellfish, and how to take an active role in protecting water quality and habitat for shellfish industries within the Big Bend Region.

The trail highlights where recreational scalloping is allowable; where to learn about commercial production of clams and oysters; the location of recreational boat ramps; and the locations of working waterfronts in this region.

The trail identifies locations for shellfish vendors, restaurants, seafood markets, marinas, bait and tackle shops, as well as providing information on working waterfronts, and identifying key areas to protect water quality and habitats.

The grant was provided by The Conservation Fund, a national organization that makes conservation work for America with support from the Richard King Mellon Foundation.

Earlier research on the region's economy demonstrated the critical link between the area's incredible land and water resources and its economic health. The Conservation Fund created the grant program to enhance this connection and support the needs expressed by the region's leaders.

“The new Big Bend Shellfish Trail is a wonderful educational and economic resource for the nearby communities,” Florida Representative with The Conservation Fund Lauren Day said. “We are thrilled to celebrate its completion with Levy County and its residents, and we applaud the efforts that went into creating this unique asset that will celebrate and strengthen the area’s distinctive community character and natural resources.”

One of the leaders helping the map come to fruition is Levy County Visitors Bureau Director Carol McQueen.

“The Big Bend Shellfish Trail Map will encourage support of local jobs and businesses, such as clam farmers, oystermen, crabbers, shrimpers, accommodations, restaurants, shops, and all service industries,” McQueen said. “By bringing more people into the region to participate along the Gulf coast trail, our communities will see economic growth due to visitor participation and buying of local shellfish products.”

Statewide Shellfish Specialist Leslie Sturmer of the University of Florida IFAS Extension said “Oyster trails can be found in many coastal states, such as Alabama, Maine, and Virginia. There is even a clam trail in New Jersey, but nowhere in the nation is there a shellfish trail. This project showcases the diversity of our shellfisheries and aquaculture industries along the Big Bend of Florida.”

For more information, call 877-387-5673 to receive a free map. To view an online map, brochure and road trip itineraries go to <http://www.visitnaturecoast.com/big-bend.php>.