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Oyster reef restoration project promotes healthy estuary and economic growth



Participants in the ribbon-cutting ceremony help herald the success of this project by the unique place where the ribbon was cut.

Story and Photo Provided

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LIVE OAK -- The Suwannee River Water Management District (District) supported an oyster reef restoration initiative along the Lone Cabbage reef complex that was led by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held on Dec. 10 to recognize the completion of the project that will benefit the local Cedar Key environment and the economy.

"Supporting this project is important for the ongoing efforts to increase the health of the estuary in the Big Bend of Florida," said Hugh Thomas, executive director of the District. "We are excited to work with our partners to bring restoration to the habitat and the local community."

The oyster reef creates a barrier that keeps fresh water in the estuary. The fresh water decreases the salinity in the water and is vital for oyster health. The restored oyster reef will provide an ideal environment for oysters and aquatic life because it will allow the fresh water from the Suwannee River to accumulate in the estuary to more historical levels.

Large limestone rocks were strategically placed on the footprint of the old oyster reef. Limestone was used because it could withstand sea level rise and changes in river discharge, along with providing an ideal surface for oyster eggs, also known as spat, to establish and grow.

"The restored oyster reef stretches three miles and will positively change the water quality to

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meet the needs of the developing oysters,” said Darlene Velez, water resource program manager at the District.

The restored oyster reef also will benefit the economy. The shellfish industry relies on the estuaries to grow and harvest oysters. With the restored oyster reef, more oysters will be available to the local communities for harvest.

This project was funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and The Nature Conservatory. Other organizations, such as the District, Cedar Key Oysterman’s Association, Cedar Key Aquaculture Association and the Big Bend Seagrass Aquatic Preserve, assisted in the oyster reef restoration.

The mission of the Suwannee River Water Management District is to protect and manage water resources using science-based solutions to support natural systems and the needs of the public. The District holds true to the belief of water for nature, water for people. Headquartered in Live Oak, the District serves 15 surrounding North Central Florida counties, including Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties.