

DEP AWARDS \$1 MILLION FOR RESTORATION OF ST. LUCIE AND CALOOSAHATCHEE ESTUARIES

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~Funds will be used to re-establish oyster populations and seagrass beds~

TALLAHASSEE – The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has awarded two \$500,000 grants to re-establish oyster populations and seagrass beds in the Indian River Lagoon's St. Lucie Estuary on Florida's east coast and the Caloosahatchee Estuary on the west coast. The grants were awarded to the Florida Oceanographic Society and the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation respectively, allowing these organizations to create restoration and monitoring programs in each of the regions.

"The St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries are vital natural resources that must be maintained and supported," said DEP Deputy Secretary for Ecosystem Restoration Drew Bartlett. "These projects will help restore healthy oyster populations and seagrass beds, which are important to these ecosystems and our economy."

Harmful freshwater discharges have resulted in losses of oysters and seagrasses in both estuaries. The grants will be used to re-establish critical estuarine habitats of shellfish and submerged aquatic vegetation beds.

Since 2005, the Florida Oceanographic Society has been actively working to restore oyster reefs and seagrasses. Their shellfish hatchery has produced millions of oysters for oyster restoration programs. Additionally, they have grown five common native species of seagrasses for testing and success studies. This grant will enable the Society to continue these restoration efforts, focused in this case on the St. Lucie Estuary and the southern Indian River Lagoon.

To offset habitat impacts and build resiliency, the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) will use its grant to begin a four-part restoration and monitoring plan for the Caloosahatchee Estuary. They will replace and restore damaged habitats to a pre-2013 level and will provide substrate to promote healthy oyster reef development. SCCF will also grow and replant founder colonies of submerged aquatic vegetation to build resiliency by providing a source of healthy reefs and vegetation.

The Caloosahatchee River was originally a shallow, meandering river, but over the past 120 years it has experienced extensive modifications in the interest of navigation, flood control and development. As a result, heavy rainfall brings large influxes of freshwater and polluted stormwater runoff from both the watershed and releases from Lake Okeechobee. These events degrade water quality and the health of oysters and seagrasses in the estuary. DEP, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and local governments are promoting or

implementing best management practices, stormwater controls and other water quality restoration projects to bring the Caloosahatchee Estuary back to health.

The Sanibel-Captive Conservation Foundation is dedicated to the conservation of coastal habitats and aquatic resources on Sanibel and Captiva and in the surrounding watershed. <http://www.sccf.org>

The Florida Oceanographic Society's mission is to inspire environmental stewardship of Florida's coastal ecosystems through education and research. www.FloridaOcean.org