



US Army Corps
of Engineers®
Norfolk District



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION
Save the Bay

Media Advisory

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – Feb. 18, 2005
#05-03

Points of Contact:

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District -- Nancy Allen or Diana Bailey, 757-201-7606

Virginia Institute of Marine Science – Roger Mann, 804-684-7108

Virginia Marine Resources Commission – Jack Travelstead, 757-247-2247

Chesapeake Bay Foundation – Chuck Epes, 804-780-1392

NOAA -- Connie Barclay, 301-713-2370 x144

Oyster restoration partnership to begin seeding Great Wicomico reefs with 15 million native oysters

What: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Norfolk District and other partners in the agency's oyster restoration efforts will begin seeding 3.8 acres of newly-constructed reefs in the Great Wicomico River with 15 million disease tolerant broodstock oysters. A culmination of more than a decade of restoration efforts by all the partners, the Great Wicomico project marks the first large-scale restoration of an estuary system as a single unit in order to "kick start" sustained natural oyster reproduction.

When: A contractor will begin seeding the reefs as soon as next month. On March 10, representatives from the partner agencies will be available for media interviews on site. Reporters and photographers will be able to board boats to view the project up close. For more details on the media event, please call Nancy Allen, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, at 757-201-7606.

Who: Although there have been joint efforts between some agencies in the past, this marks the first time that all of the partners committed to restoring the native oyster population in the lower Chesapeake Bay, including the Corps, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC), the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), are collaborating on a single, large-scale restoration effort.

The Plan: Disease, water quality and over-harvesting have reduced the population of the Chesapeake Bay's native oyster by more than 99 percent. The last decade of work and research into native oyster restoration has taught valuable lessons and led to the development of our current plan, using large numbers of disease-resistant native oysters in small estuaries to rebuild local stocks.

A base of reef systems and extensive shell plantings on Baylor Grounds already existed in the Great Wicomico River from prior VMRC efforts from 1996-2002. The Corps provided additional expertise and support to provide more shell in 2003 and 2004. The reefs will be seeded with disease tolerant oyster strains from VIMS that were cultured in large numbers under contract at Sarah's Creek Shellfish in Gloucester, Va.

Due to the small size of the young oysters used in seeding these reefs, they are more prone to loss by predation. To minimize the number taken by these predators, the partnership is planning to employ devices to protect the young oysters. With the planting will begin a year-round intensive monitoring program, completed by VIMS with NOAA funding, examining oyster survival in the face of predation, disease challenges and recruitment throughout the Great Wicomico River system.

Background: Practical, large-scale oyster habitat restoration in Virginia began in 1993 with the construction of a three-dimensional reef at Palace bar in the Piankatank River. This was followed by construction of a second reef in the Great Wicomico River in 1996. These reefs were seeded with a large number of broodstock oysters purchased from Tangier waterman by VMRC and CBF. A marked increase in oyster recruitment in the Great Wicomico galvanized interest in further efforts by all partners.

CBF initiated an enormously successful public education program on the value of oysters and oyster reefs to the ecology of the Chesapeake Bay and an oyster gardening program in which millions of oysters were raised for transplanting. In addition, CBF has grown and transplanted nearly 4 million selectively bred oysters from its commercial scale oyster farm onto reefs in the Great Wicomico and other Chesapeake Bay tributaries. VMRC developed a long-term strategy of planting oyster shell in both the traditional veneers on productive oyster grounds and as three dimensional reef sanctuaries. VIMS pursued a multifaceted research program on reef ecology, including development of selectively bred and disease tolerant strains of local oysters, an effort largely funded by NOAA Sea Grant's Oyster Disease Research Program.

NOAA also partnered with the Commonwealth of Virginia in the Virginia Oyster Heritage Program and remains a strong participant in bay wide efforts to this date. A two-year effort during 2000-2002 by the states of Maryland and Virginia in collaboration with NOAA and the EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program attempted to estimate the number of oysters in the bay as a baseline for a 10-year effort.

The environmental benefits of oyster restoration encouraged the Corps' Norfolk District to bring their skills in large-scale project construction to the Chesapeake Bay effort in the Rappahannock River and Tangier and Pocomoke Sounds beginning in 1999.

Reef construction as a central element of oyster habitat restoration has continued at an increasing pace, and over 100 reef sanctuaries now exist in the Virginia portion of the Chesapeake Bay.