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CRCL awarded federal funding to join Gulf Oyster Recycling and Reef Restoration Network

Partnership is led by Restore America's Estuaries and funded by bipartisan infrastructure act

The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, which operates one of the largest shell recycling programs in the nation, has received federal funding to join the new Gulf of Mexico Community-Based Oyster Recycling and Reef Restoration Network. The three-year cooperative agreement is led by Restore America's Estuaries (RAE) and supported by NOAA. It has received \$5 million in bipartisan infrastructure law funding to support oyster restoration, shell recycling and community engagement.

The GRO network brings together CRCL, RAE, Galveston Bay Foundation, Tampa Bay Watch, Pensacola and Perdido Bays Estuary Program and Alabama Coastal Foundation to establish or enhance oyster shell recycling programs, restore existing oyster reefs, install new oyster reefs to protect shorelines and bolster populations and share lessons learned with members of the Gulf region.

CRCL, a member organization of RAE that was Louisiana's first statewide nonprofit dedicated to confronting coastal land loss, has recycled more than 13 million pounds of shell through its Oyster Shell Recycling Program since 2014. The nonprofit has built five oyster reefs to date, with another reef build scheduled for this fall at Pointe-au-Chien. CRCL has measured a 50% reduction in the rate of shoreline erosion in locations where reefs have been built. CRCL's oyster reefs create habitat for new oysters to grow. Oyster reefs also minimize storm surge during hurricanes. More than 30 New Orleans-area restaurants participate in CRCL's Oyster Shell Recycling Program.

"Restore America's Estuaries is excited to expand our partnerships in the Gulf region and to collect and share the knowledge and skills of our partners in the area of oyster shell recycling, nature-based shoreline resilience and community engagement," said Daniel Hayden, president and CEO of RAE. "We appreciate NOAA's confidence in RAE to not only further coastal resilience through on-the-ground restoration but also grow the network of communities and organizations participating in these projects, particularly those that stand to lose the most in the face of changing coastal ecosystems."

"Building partnerships is among our core strengths at CRCL, and we are eager to work with these other organizations to maximize the effectiveness of our efforts," said Kim Reyher, executive director of CRCL and chairwoman of the RAE Board of Directors. "We have seen great success with our oyster reefs, and we know that success can be replicated across the Gulf Coast."

The funding will help pay for shell bagging volunteer events hosted by CRCL starting this fall. It will also support CRCL's construction of two oyster reefs. One of them will be built by volunteers and community partners in the fall of 2024 in Plaquemines Parish. It will protect a culturally significant site selected by the Atakapa-Ishak/Chawasha tribe of Grand Bayou Indian Village.

In the fall of 2025, the funding will support a reef built by volunteers and community partners in Terrebonne Parish. This reef site will be selected by the Grand Caillou/Dulac Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw.

The program will develop a peer-to-peer learning network to share best practices and lessons learned, and to assist with starting or growing new shell recycling and restoration efforts.

To facilitate the network, and as a commitment to creating meaningful community engagement, RAE has partnered with Minorities in Aquaculture (MIA) to provide a particular lens on the suitability and transferability of these tools for unrepresented groups, women and tribal communities.

“We are very excited to partner with Restore America’s Estuaries on this project to ensure that underrepresented communities have access and advocacy within shellfish restoration and environmental education in coastal regions” said Imani Black, founder and CEO of Minorities in Aquaculture. “MIA thrives to provide continuous support for aquaculture/fisheries organizations, institutions, facilities and companies, in developing initiatives that will be intentionally impactful and stewardship empowering to all minority demographics moving forward.”

By investing in oyster shell recovery and oyster reef restoration, GRO will provide natural habitat for oyster larvae to settle and grow, promoting more robust reefs in the future. Enhanced oyster reefs improve water quality by filter feeding, so they improve habitat for other species, many of which are commercially and culturally valuable.

GRO will also support efforts to create local jobs and kickstart conservation projects in communities at risk of climate hazards such as storm surge and flooding. Underserved communities are particularly at risk and will be prioritized in site selection.

The federal funding would not have been possible without support from members of Congress who recognize the importance of nature-based solutions to coastal resilience. RAE and CRCL both thank Louisiana Rep. Garret Graves for his leadership.

RAE and CRCL also thank Reps. Vern Buchanan, Brian Babin, Troy Carter, Kathy Castor, Clay Higgins, Steven Palazzo, Jerry Carl, Neal Dunn and Byron Donalds for joining Rep. Graves in supporting the proposal.

Founded in 1995, Restore America’s Estuaries is a national alliance of 10 coastal conservation groups dedicated to restoring and preserving America’s estuaries and coasts. RAE provides a bipartisan, unified voice for coastal restoration and advances the science and practice of habitat restoration through on-the-ground projects, proven science and collaboration.

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[The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana](#) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to unite people in action to achieve a thriving, sustainable Louisiana coast for all.

A map of oyster reefs built along Louisiana’s coast is [available online](#). A list of restaurants participating in CRCL’s Oyster Shell Recycling Program can be found [on the organization’s website](#).