

Shells lure oysters home in Woodard Bay

By JOHN DODGE

New homes by the thousands were installed on the tideflats and submerged lands of the state's Woodard Bay Natural Resource Conservation Area in Henderson Inlet on Friday.

The homes are empty Pacific oyster shells, strategically placed in one-square-meter test plots to see if the tiny larvae of the native Olympia oyster will float by, attach and grow.

The project grew out of the first-of-its-kind lease last October of state Department of Natural Resources aquatic lands to a conservation group, in this case, The Nature Conservancy.

The conservancy is paying \$100 a year to lease 10 acres of submerged marine land for 10 years to see if it can bring back the Olympia oyster, and a healthier marine environment, to Woodard Bay and surrounding area.

"It's part of a larger restoration effort throughout Puget Sound," Nature Conservancy's Betsy Lyons said Friday as a work party of six pulled 90, 20-pound bags of shell off a barge and placed them at six different tide elevations.

Lyons was referring to a three-year, \$80 million campaign by the conservancy, The Trust for Public Land and People for Puget Sound to lay the groundwork for an ambitious effort to restore and protect hundreds of miles of Puget Sound shoreline and create 10 new waterfront parks.

Other than Woodard Bay, the conservancy will try its Johnny Appleseed approach to bringing back the Olympia oyster in Eld Inlet's Frye Cove next year.

The conservation group is working hand in hand with the Puget Sound Restoration Fund, a nonprofit group that operates a community shellfish farm in Henderson Inlet and works on shellfish and habitat projects across the sound.

"We know there is a remnant population of Olympia oysters here in Woodard Bay," restoration fund executive director Betsy Peabody said.

"We're trying the different test plots to make sure we're working in the right area for the best oyster survival."

Now is the time of year when the Olympia oyster larvae is floating around South Sound, looking for a place to land and grow, noted restoration fund worker Brian Allen.

Friday's work was slippery, muddy going as the work party took advantage of an extremely low tide to get the shells in place on the gooey mudflats.

"Walk on the balls of your feet - never put your weight on your heels," Allen advised in a bid to keep everybody upright.

By later this summer, the conservation groups should have a good idea what tidal elevations work best for recruiting Olympia oysters, Peabody said. By next spring, data on survival rates will help direct more large-scale habitat restoration work at Woodard Bay, she said.

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If the Olympia oyster colonizes, it will provide food for species such as diving ducks and reef-like habitat for crabs, fish and other marine life, according to marine biologists.

The oysters also will filter nutrients out of the water, improving water quality, Peabody said.

There are no plans to harvest oysters off the DNR lease. However, the more the Olympia oyster recolonizes, the more its populations will have a chance to spread around South Sound to beaches where they can be harvested, Peabody said.

Olympia oysters

The Olympia oyster is native to South Sound and was popular with American Indians, early settlers and the early commercial shellfish growing industry.

No larger than a 50-cent piece, the Olympia oyster has a complex flavor that is metallic, salty and sweet at the same time.

Production peaked in the 1920s, then crashed under the weight of overharvest, habitat loss and pulp mill pollution.

For more information on work under way to restore Puget Sound habitat and shellfish, visit www.restorationfund.org and www.nature.org/washington.



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Photo by Steven M. Herppich/The Olympian

A work party organized by The Nature Conservancy gathered at the state Woodard Bay Natural Resource Conservation Area at Henderson Inlet on Friday to place thousands of Pacific oyster shells on the tideflats and submerged lands to attract and restore native Olympia oysters. Tristan Peter-Contesse (left), Puget Sound Restoration Fund project coordinator, and Brian Allen, project employee, transport shells to the site.



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Dave Wilderman, state Department of Natural Resources natural areas ecologist, and Betsy Peabody, Puget Sound Restoration Fund executive director, lay down the shells at one of the sites of the project.