



# GULF SHELLFISH INSTITUTE

Research for Sustainable Aquaculture & Healthy Ecosystems

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## **Florida Provides Global Leadership for Coastal Restoration With Seagrass & Clams**

The State of Florida has provided global leadership for protecting our environment and strengthening our economy. On June 5, the 2022-2023 budget was signed into law, securing funding that will lead the way in restoring estuaries and growing coastal economies. Thanks to the leadership from Governor Ron DeSantis, State Senator Jim Boyd, and State Representative Will Robinson, \$2.5 million has been appropriated to support sustainability and resilience.

The funding will kickstart a five year research and restoration initiative in the only place in the nation that shares a border with three estuaries of national significance, Tampa Bay, Charlotte Harbor and Sarasota Bay. This project will provide for large-scale plantings of clams and seagrass, which will support local businesses and create a natural “macro-laboratory” that will allow researchers to evaluate natural biological mitigation strategies to combat nutrient loading and improve water quality. These estuaries are cradles of the Gulf, providing critical nursery habitat to commercially and recreationally important species and supporting billions of dollars in fisheries and tourism every year. Restoring and maintaining healthy water in these systems is key to community wellbeing and economic success.

This proof-of-concept project combines science, environment and economy to enhance estuary resiliency through large scale restoration of seagrass and clam populations. Efforts will be guided by research scientists, implemented by industry specialists, and advised and monitored by an external advisory panel of experts throughout the process. This small investment in our future will yield high returns, promoting resilience of our coastal ecosystems, providing jobs and protecting the heritage of working waterfronts. It will also create room for bivalve shellfish aquaculture – one of the greenest agricultural products around – to expand.

Clams equal clean water. Cleaner water allows more light to filter through the water column which promotes photosynthesis and encourages seagrass growth. Clams, like seagrass, can stabilize sediments and provide habitat for other organisms. Together, clams and seagrass form a vital part of the marine environment that is critical to thousands of other marine organisms, including the Florida manatee (whose diet depends seagrass.)

Dr. Angela Collins, Florida Sea Grant Agent, UF/IFAS Extension and Marine Extension Advisor to the Gulf Shellfish Institute says this: *“This project will allow for a large-scale research initiative that utilizes industry expertise, supports local economies, and can provide scientists the opportunity to address existing data gaps in situ. It is exciting to see this synergy between industry, researchers and resource managers, and we are hopeful this work provides the*

*groundwork necessary to better quantify site-specific environmental benefits and guide future efforts.”*

Led by the Gulf Shellfish Institute and its recent program All Clams On Deck, with support of several members of the Blue Community Consortium, and guidance from multiple businesses, management agencies, universities, and NGOs, this project will prioritize research that can quantify environmental benefits and solidify best practices that maximize the contributions of restored clams and seagrass to our coastal ecosystems. This proof-of-concept will provide the data that are necessary for efforts like these to expand throughout Florida and beyond. Momentum is building already, with efforts underway to include all of the cities and counties that border the three targeted national estuaries to ask them to join this initiative with matching funds. Are you interesting in joining this mission? If so you are invited to join the efforts by signing up on the All Clams On Deck website (<https://www.allclamsondeck.org>.)

As the project confirms this methodology of combining clams and Clemson seagrass restoration for enhancing our marine environment, it will expand throughout Florida. The project has already begun efforts to include all of the cities and counties that border the three national estuaries to ask them to join us with matching funds for this effort. The project invites you to join the efforts by signing up on the All Clams On Deck website (<https://www.allclamsondeck.org>.)

Ed Chiles one of the founders of this project and the Vice President of the Gulf Shellfish Institute in reflecting on the importance of this project sums it up well when he states *“Water quality issues are what keeps me up at night. We have to be better stewards of these critical coastal estuaries. Our grandchildren deserve nothing less.”*

The mission of the Gulf Shellfish Institute is to facilitate, support and encourage increased production of shellfish in Florida and the Gulf region for both economic and environmental benefit through cooperative, industry-driven research and outreach. Increasing shellfish production via aquaculture will not only support the environment by the ecosystem services it provides, but also the economy through resilient, working waterfronts, and cultural heritage tied to Gulf seafood for generations to come.