

After success, a sequel



MATTHEW BECK/Chronicle

Members of Gator Dredging use a vacuum-like device to suck Lyngbya algae from Hunters Cove in Crystal River as part of the second phase of the Save Crystal River project. The boom, left, is connected to a nozzle that lifts the algae and removes it to an area on land where the debris is separated.

Save Crystal River begins second phase of King's Bay restoration project

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Staff writer

Another phase of Save Crystal River's ambitious public-private restoration of King's Bay began last week in and around Hunters Cove, and the group is bringing ample state resources to bear in its quest to rid the bay of invasive Lyngbya algae and restore habitat long lost to the intruder.

"It's very exciting to have the project continuing," said Lisa Moore, president of the non-profit community-advocacy group. "We're really going to see major change in this ecosystem."

Gator Dredging is tasked with vacuuming 4.67 acres of invasive Lyngbya and other unwanted muck from the bottom of residential canals and a massive 16-foot-deep trench stretching along the southern coastline of the cove.

The Clearwater company will also work on 3.46 acres of three other plots designated by the Southwest Florida Water Management District as fronts in the battle against Lyngbya, a slimy, stringy cyanobacteria which clogs spring vents, crowds out native vegetation and reduces oxygen for marine life.

Funded by a \$14 million legislative appropriation in March and a pending \$2 million grant from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the project's total



The large-scale operation that Save Crystal River has spearheaded has a land-based element where water and debris is filtered, separated and eventually returned to the environment.

budget is \$3.4 million. "It's just been a great centerpiece of public-private partnerships," Moore said.

Gator Dredging President and CEO William Coughlin said crews mobilized their heavy equipment about three weeks ago just east of the basin at a vacant staging area owned by local urologist Dr. Paresh Desai.

A pair of barges with mechanical suction hoses were transported to their first work sites on Wednesday. The barges suck out just enough of the muck without removing a lot of

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WANT TO PITCH IN?

Here's what Save Crystal River says waterfront residents near the project area can do to help:

- Put boat lifts up in full position if possible.
- Put boat on a trailer and remove from water until restoration is past your dock space.
- Frequent boaters are encouraged to move boats from the restoration area to another location. SCR volunteers can also help move vessels to a temporary location. Contact SCR volunteer Jack Huegel at jhuegel2@gmail.com for more information.
- Use caution when boating nearby project areas.

WANT AN OVERVIEW?

- To see a map of the the second phase's locations, see this story online at chronicleonline.com.

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the natural sediments, Coughlin said.

"We got to take a little bit because we want to get the Lyngbya," Coughlin said. "But it's not taking inches or feet of the original bottom."

The hoses, both mechanical and handheld, will also be snaked underneath boats and docks. Moore said her volunteers canvassed neighborhoods beforehand with flyers to give waterfront homeowners a heads-up and let them know how they can help.

"They've been very cooperative," Moore said.

Transported via a movable pipeline, sediment-laden water removed by the machines makes its way to a dewatering system on the surface and is filtered before being returned to its source.

Lyngbya's favorite nutrients, nitrogen and phosphorus, are also removed from the water as it travels through a series of ultra-fine polymer meshes that are part of the filtration devices.

"In most instances, it's clearer than the actual spring water," Coughlin said about the resulting water, which is filtered in about five minutes.

Once the bottoms are cleared, aquaculture specialist and subcontractor Sea & Shoreline will plant a habitat-restoring eelgrass nicknamed "Rockstar" for its hardiness.

"I don't know what we'd do without Sea & Shoreline. They've just gone above and beyond," Moore said.

The project must be completed by Nov. 15, when countless manatees will have begun to migrate to Citrus County's shores from the cool waters of the Gulf.

Coughlin said the groups are on track to meet the deadline, and his plans to deploy a third barge to hasten the labor.

"We've got quite a bit of work to do out there," he said.

Coughlin said the potential limiting factor is the



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Save Crystal River volunteer Jack Huegel said he has seen a spike in the grass growth on the bottom of canals due to the efforts to plant aquatic vegetation in King's Bay.

remaining \$2 million of DEP grant money, which has yet to be contracted out by the city.

Crystal River Waterfronts Manager Ed Call said DEP is still looking over the project's work plan before it awards the springs protection monies to the city because it can't give funds to nongovernmental or nonprofit agencies such as SCR.

Call said he's "confident" DEP will sign off on the project soon.

"It's a good project," he said. "It helps galvanize the community to see this."

A similar \$1.6 million pilot project was completed by SCR and Gator Dredging in late 2015, when 3.41 acres of canals were cleaned and more than 8,000 cubic yards of Lyngbya was removed, dried and sent to local farms as fertilizer.

Over 360 cages encasing 1,800 eelgrass plantings were installed as part of that project. The cages protect the burgeoning eelgrass from the mouths of hungry manatees.

"The success of the pilot

project is indisputable," Moore said. "It went beyond our expectations, and it's still growing."

Moore said SCR will continue to lobby state lawmakers for additional funding to clean four more regions of King's Bay over the next seven years to be ready for Crystal River's 100th birthday in July 2023.

"We want to be Crystal River, restored," Moore said.

Locals who support the ongoing cleanup should also "reach out" to legislators to let them know how they feel, Moore said.

Jack Huegel, who with his wife Janis has lived on Crystal River's waterfront for 30 years, said it's clear how invaluable this grass-roots project is, and locals are noticing.

"They see what's doing for Crystal River," said Huegel, who is also a SCR volunteer of three years.

To see a map of the second phase's locations, see this story online at chronicleonline.com.

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