

# Ocean Service Volunteers Plant Bay Grasses

—By Glenda Tyson

On June 17, volunteers from NOAA's National Ocean Service waded through icy water up to their necks and stuck their hands in mud at Otter Point Creek, Md.

The 26 volunteers were planting underwater bay grasses to help restore the site's vital natural habitat, which is in the NOAA-state cooperative Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, located 18 miles northeast of Baltimore, Md.

Underwater grasses are extremely important to the health and productivity of Chesapeake Bay and the many rivers and streams that feed it. Several varieties of grass provide food and habitat for adult species of fish, shellfish and waterfowl. Bay grasses also help keep water clean by trapping sediment and nutrients and by slowing down wave action, protecting shorelines from erosion.

There has been a sharp decline in the growth of grasses in Chesapeake Bay, mainly due to sediment and nitrogen pollution. The grasses need sunlight to grow and survive. Too much sediment from runoff and an excess of algae blooms block the sunlight they need to grow.

Alison Hammer, the physical scientist in the Ocean Service's Special Projects Office who last year originated the bay plantings, said, "Although most of the volunteers have backgrounds in science, many of their positions do not allow them to actually work in the field. This event gives folks a chance to get outside and do some hands-on field work, and it is a really nice change for them. The Chesapeake Bay is a local treasure

right in our backyard that needs our help."

Julia Brownlee, a geographic information system analyst for the Special Projects Office, is a biologist by training. "This is my second year participating and I enjoy having a chance to get out of the office and get my hands dirty," she said.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation trained about 40 volunteers on how to grow a species of bay grass called wild celery in grow tanks in their NOAA offices in Silver Spring, Md. The volunteers planted seeds in the tanks in March of this year and grew them until the planting.

To plant the bay grass, volunteers dressed in old tennis shoes, old shorts, bathing suits and T-shirts walked out into the water in groups of three or four and carried small trays of the grass grown in the tanks. While one person held onto the tray, two volunteers separated the grasses into smaller clumps. Then using their hands, the volunteers cleared a shallow hole in the mud and placed that

grass into the spot and patted the grass into the sediment.

"Our wild celery was long and lush," said volunteer Amy Zimmerlin.

Despite less than perfect weather conditions, the NOAA group persevered in planting its own grasses, plus 30 or so additional trays provided by a local school.

"We more than doubled our participation this year," Hammer said. "Hopefully next year we can make this a NOAA-wide event."

Otter Point Creek is one of the last remaining expanses of freshwater tidal marsh in the upper Chesapeake Bay.

The site includes 672 acres of open water, tidal marshes, forested wetlands and upland hardwood forests surrounded by major highways, large residential communities and heavy commercial and industrial development.

Otter Point Creek winds through marsh and bottom land forest before flowing into the Bush River on the upper western shore of Chesapeake Bay. ☺



Alison Hammer/NOAA

Cory Riley and Maurice Crawford join other National Ocean Service volunteers June 17 planting grasses in Chesapeake Bay.