

The Meadows Foundation Awards Nature Conservancy Grant

“More than any other marine system, oyster reefs are critical to cleaning the Gulf waters and providing crucial habitat for other species. The average oyster filters 40-60 gallons of water per day, making oyster reefs cleaning machines,” said Texas Nature Conservancy State Director Laura Huffman. “A one-acre reef would therefore filter approximately 24 million gallons of water every day. In addition, oyster reefs provide essential habitat to marine species including many that are important to the commercial and sport fishing industries, and keep coastal shoreline erosion at a minimum and protect coastal communities from storm surges,” Huffman added.

The oyster reefs of the Gulf were fragile before the BP Gulf spill tragedy. Due to extensive fishing and shell dredging for road construction, up to half of the Gulf’s oyster reefs had been depleted. While the overall impact of the spill is yet unknown, to date, 62,000 square miles or one-third of the Gulf have been placed off limits for fishing and much of the Gulf coastline from Louisiana to Florida could sustain additional catastrophic damage.

“Texas is in a unique position relative to subsequent clean-up and restoration efforts. Texas can become, in effect, the ‘marine nursery’ for the rest of the Gulf,” said Meadows Foundation President and CEO Linda Perryman Evans. “Various plant and animal life can be established along the Texas coast for subsequent repopulation to other areas of the Gulf. However, oyster reefs are the most important starting point for Gulf recovery,” Evans added.

The Texas Nature Conservancy has constructed new beds or restored existing reefs in two locations along the upper and lower Texas coast. Significant federal funding has been approved for a third project near Palacios at the historic Half-Moon oyster reef.

The Meadows Foundation grant completes a challenge from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to obtain \$850,000 in federal funds and completes the funding requirements to restore the 12-acre Half-Moon reef essential to restoration of the Gulf. With funds in place, the Conservancy hopes to have 12 acres of oyster reef restored by May 31, 2011 and establish a vibrant oyster colony on the reef by the end of 2012. The colony can then serve as a bank to repopulate other parts of the Gulf with marine plant and animal life over the subsequent five years.

The Nature Conservancy began in 1951 to preserve the diversity of plants, animals, and natural communities by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. The Conservancy has been responsible for the preservation of over 119 million acres and 5,000 miles of river worldwide.

The Nature Conservancy of Texas chapter was established in 1964 to identify significant areas in the state that need protection. By purchasing acreage outright or through cooperative agreements with private landowners (easements and leases), it conserves and manages over 1 million acres in Texas. In addition to preserving ecologically significant land and improving wildlife habitat, the Conservancy also provides youth and adults with opportunities to learn about wildlife biology, conservation and land management. Many former Nature Conservancy preserves have become state and national parks.