



[<=Back](#)

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DNR hopes deep-water reef draws fish

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By John Burke
Savannah Morning News

There is a new fishing reef being developed off the Georgia coast, and it is the first one to be located in more than 100 feet of water.

This past week, the DNR sunk a 195-foot barge approximately 17 nautical miles off Sapelo Island.

The depth at where the barge was sunk this past week is between 150 and 160 feet of water and it is part of an ongoing program to improve recreational fishing in Georgia's offshore waters.

Known as the "DW" reef (for deep water), the coordinates recorded by the tug boat which deployed the barge are 31 degrees, 22.73 minutes north and 79 degrees, 49.15 minutes west.

"This is our first attempt at a deep-water reef and we hope that the location will draw such fish as tuna and wahoo," commented Henry Ansley, reef project coordinator for the DNR.

Georgia now has a total of 18 reefs along the coast, most of which are between four and 23 miles offshore and are located in about 70 feet of water.

Ansley says there also is a continuous effort to improve each reef site by the addition of concrete and other materials.

Expanding reef sites

"We have and are expanding each reef site to about four square miles. We are developing patches of areas around the initial reef so that the fishing pressure is spread over a wider area and there are more places for the fish to feed and hide," Ansley commented.

Through extra funding provided last year through the legislature,

the DNR is placing structures known as "Pallet Balls" on various artificial reef sites along the coast.

There are three sizes of be units, the largest being "Reef Balls" and the smallest "Bay Balls." They were designed and patented by a group of former Georgia Tech students who formed Reef Ball Development Group Ltd.

They are constructed in this area by Geothermal Energy Management of Savannah under a licensing agreement with the Group at Geothermal's plant in Bryan County.

The units are semi-spherical, looking a lot like an over-sized, gigantic ball of swiss cheese that has been cut in half. And they are made of a concrete mixture which has a pH level similar to natural seawater and also has super high strength.

Bottom weighted

They are made so that more than half of the weight is in the bottom, within a foot of the sea floor. They have a specially treated surface which is designed to attract marine growth and each has an estimated life of 500-plus years.

According to Ansley, the "Pallet Balls" are about 3x4 feet in size, have multiple holes of varying size and weigh approximately 1,200 pounds each.

The funding by the Georgia Legislature allowed the DNR to purchase about 1800 of these balls, and all but about 200 have been deployed throughout the reef system.

The latest deployment have been at new reefs being constructed off Little St. Simons and Cumberland Islands.

"We do not put all the units in one place," he said, explaining that they are placed in "patches" of about 75 to 100 balls at a given location.

The reef program, which officially started back in the 1970's in Georgia, has proven to be highly successful in almost every state where they are located.

The Georgia reefs are of particular importance because they provide suitable habitat for both food and growth in areas where previously there was nothing but sandy bottom.

Waters are different

"Our coastal waters are different than they are in Florida and other tropic areas where the reefs are designed primarily to concentrate fish. The materials we put down soon grow barnacles and soon small fish are attracted. Eventually all sizes are drawn to the area," he added.

When asked about storm damage to the reefs, Ansley said that overall the Georgia reefs have withstood such problems. "When hurricane David (1979) hit, the storm broke the stern off a sunken Liberty Ship and moved it about 300 feet. We have been lucky that we have not been hit with major hurricanes such as Hugo which hit Charleston and Andrew, which devastated a large area of lower Florida."

According to information received from Geothermal, a similar project was completed for South Carolina during 1997 where a total of 1,200 pallet balls were deployed at six locations from the "Fish America Reef" near Hilton Head Island to a site offshore of Murrell's Inlet.

For more information on the reef balls and future projects, contact Paul Richards at Geothermal (912) 964-7486 .

[<=Back](#)

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