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## Hatchery spawns state conservation recognition

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NETARTS - Netarts Bay may have a healthier marine environment in coming years thanks in part to Whiskey Creek Shellfish Hatchery.

In 2008, Hatchery owners Sue Cudd and Mark Wiegardt quadrupled the amount of young native Olympia oysters they're producing free of charge to help restore wild populations in the bay.

Donated oyster spat total nearly 50 million to date, said Dick Vander Schaaf, Oregon Nature Conservancy Coastal Marine Conservation Director.

As a way of saying "thanks," the Oregon Nature Conservancy honored Cudd and Wiegardt with their Business Partner Conservation Leadership Award Oct. 30.

"They've acted as a partner...they've been gracious about donating their time and expertise...have been there every step of the way. It's meant the world to me," Vander Schaaf said.

The Nature Conservancy, a world-wide conservation organization that owns or manages 46 nature preserves in Oregon, honored Oregon's "conservation heroes" at its eighth annual Conservation Leadership Awards Luncheon.

"This is one of only three awards given statewide by the Nature Conservancy this year," said Tillamook County Commissioner Mark Labhart, who attended the ceremony. "There were 500 people in the room, and Mark and Sue were very humble about receiving this statewide recognition for their efforts to restore the native oyster populations. I'm glad to see that this recognition did not go unnoticed. They are a true asset to our county and well deserving of this recognition."

Whiskey Creek entered into partnership with the Nature Conservancy four years ago, Wiegardt said. The hatchery owners and the conservancy were interested in restoring native Olympia oyster populations to the bay.

At best estimates, Vander Schaaf said then Netarts Bay Olympic oyster populations totaled in the "several 1,000s." Healthy populations, he added, number in the millions.

The size of a half-dollar, the Olympic oyster was harvested to near-extinction by the 1920s. The oyster consumers eat today and that is raised in commercial shellfish beds is the much larger Pacific oyster.

Wild oyster populations, Vander Schaaf said, are an important aspect of the marine ecosystem. They naturally filter oceanic waters including algae blooms, along with creating habitat for fish and small marine animals.

The Olympias, Wiegardt said, are not aggressive at reproducing. "But they're coming back, slowly but surely."

"We're certainly seeing natural reproduction happening in the bay," Vander Schaaf said. "Viable adults are putting out seed and setting. We deem that successful."

Whiskey Creek's donation, Vander Schaaf added, is of special importance given the difficulties the hatchery has had spawning commercial oyster spat the past year. One of the largest commercial shellfish hatcheries on the West Coast, Whiskey Creek stopped production for approximately six months during the past year while the owners grappled with first a *vibrio tubiashii* outbreak from bay water and later water pH problems.

The hatchery owners, he added, never approached him about stopping their donation, even when their business wasn't producing commercial spat.

"It's nice to be recognized," Wiegardt said and added that this joint effort was an example of how the shellfish industry and groups such as the Nature Conservancy can work cohesively for the betterment of the oceanic environment.

What this project "means to us," Wiegardt said, "is that we just don't mind helping them out."

"The Olympia oyster is a small creature with potentially a big role in restoring healthy coastal ecosystems," Vander Schaaf announced at the awards presentation. "Sue and Mark understand that, and that's why they've been strong champions for restoring native shellfish."