

3/15/07

River cleanup set for Saturday

BY AMANDA BISHOP
NCR Reporter

More than 500 people will gather together Saturday morning to remove fishing poles, couches, television sets, beer bottles and more from the St. Marys River.

The 11th annual St. Marys River Celebration begins at 8 a.m., with volunteers gathering to clean the river and its tributaries at 19 sites throughout Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia.

Dean Woehrle, event coordinator for the St. Marys River Management Committee, said both area residents and frequent visitors work hard to spiff up the river each year.

"There's some people who are here at this time every year that always make it part of their vacation," he said.

A kayak group often participates as well, kayaking down the river over the course of a few days, picking up litter along the journey.

While Woehrle appreciates the regular volunteers, he encourages participation by anyone interested in cleaning up the river.

"All they need to do is just show up at one of the sites at 8 a.m.," he said.

Volunteers should wear comfortable clothing suitable for picking up trash and dirty material. The St. Marys River Management Committee and Keep Nassau Beautiful will provide gloves and trash bags.

Cleanup efforts will cease between 11 and 11:30 a.m., with all volunteers given tickets to attend a luncheon at White Oak Plantation.

"White Oak puts on a heck of a feast," Woehrle said, adding that he appreciates the chef's preparation of a wide assembly of goodies for the volunteers.

The total amount of trash collected is tallied through participant data cards. Each participant writes down the number of bags of trash he or she collects, along with the approximate weight of the bags.

roughly 6,200 volunteers have gathered nearly 460,000 pounds of trash. Total poundage continually increases from year to year.

"It hasn't been under 50,000 pounds in six or seven years," Woehrle said.

A lot of the trash comes from Mills Creek Landing, located just east of Callahan on A1A.

"That site just amazes me, the amount of trash it has each year," Woehrle said, adding that he wishes state and county authorities would enforce litter laws.

"If five or six people got fines for, what is it, \$500, then everybody would stop littering. Both (the county and the state) have fines and ordinances against littering."

Though he's disappointed with people's lack of respect for public land, Woehrle is appreciative of the volunteers who try to make the river more beautiful.

Regular sponsors include St. Marys River Management Committee, Keep Nassau Beautiful, White Oak Plantation, Baptist Nassau, Nassau County Farm Bureau, the Nature Conservancy, Nassau Soil and Water Conservation District, Sandhill Recycling Center, Schwend Insurance, St. Johns River Management., the *Nassau County Record*, the *Fernandina Beach News-Leader* and Black River Development. All of the sponsors donate \$500 to have their names printed on the back of T-shirts given to the volunteers, and some volunteers even go above and beyond. Sandhill hauls the garbage to the landfill, Keep Nassau Beautiful donates trash bags and gloves, White Oak provides the lunch and Nassau County Farm Bureau allows Woehrle to coordinate the

effort through their office.

"You just can't do it without (sponsors) like that," he said.

In 10 years of cleanup efforts, volunteers have picked up everything from sectional couches to women's underwear. The most common items found are beer bottles and leftover fishing supplies. Though the trash always returns, Woehrle is hopeful people will get the message someday.

"There's a theory that if you drive up to a site and there's no litter, they won't throw any down," he said, adding that littering seems to be a geographic issue, because some parts of the country are litter-free. "I know with all the problems in the world today litter is so small, but it's something that's so easy to take care of."

Woehrle encourages volunteers to bring their children with them.

"My theory is, if you take a kid to go out and pick up trash, then he won't throw it down when he gets older," he said.

The annual cleanup always has a good turnout, with as few as 550 and as many as 875 volunteers attending each year.

To participate, call Woehrle at 879-4398 or simply show up at any of the 19 sites. Sites include the Boy Scout Camp in Baker County, the St. George Bridge adjacent to County Road 121, Tompkins Landing, Traders Hill, the U.S. 301 bridge, Scotts Landing, Camp Pickney, Prospect Landing, Kings Ferry, Temple Landing, White Oak, the U.S. 17 bridge, Egans Creek, the A1A bridge at ICW, Lofton Creek, Mills Creek Landing, St. Marys, Edwards Road and Dark Entry Creek.

E-mail comments and suggestions to abishop@nassaucountyrecord.com.

Over the past decade,