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New crop of sea oats ready for planting

Treasure Island leads the effort to restore one of nature's most valuable beach defenses: sea oats.

Volunteers are planting protective sea oats along a stretch of Treasure Island beach on Saturday, August 9th beginning at 8:30am. Volunteers need to bring a shovel and meet on the beach by the Island Inn, 9980 Gulf Boulevard. The 12,000 seedlings, provided free of charge by the Pinellas County Coastal Coordinator, will be planted to fill in the dune line gaps northward and southward of the Island Inn.

The tall beach grass, named for its grain-like seeds, forms and maintains dunes by trapping sand. But sea oats are easily destroyed by foot traffic, leading to erosion of dunes and entire beaches.

"I don't think the damage is intentional," said Dennis Velasco, Beach Stewardship Committee chair. "People just don't realize how easily they can kill sea oats by stepping on them or displacing sand on dune faces. It's ironic, because these plants are remarkably tough in other ways, surviving constant exposure to wind-blown sand, saltwater, heat, drought and nutrient-poor soil."

In a healthy coastal ecosystem, sand circulates between the dunes, the beach and shallow-water areas, said Velasco. "But without plants to anchor the dunes, sand just blows away. Fortunately, we can help solve the problem by planting sea oats and encouraging people to stay off the dunes."

Dunes provide a natural barrier against storm surges and high winds during severe weather, said Rick Raus, Assistant Public Works Director for the City of Treasure Island. "Without dunes, beachfront property is at greater risk. Wildlife, such as shore birds and sea turtles, can lose critical habitat, and the coastline itself can be altered." This is the sixth volunteer sea oat restoration on Treasure Island since 2004.

Once planted, the six-inch seedlings will mature and begin producing seed in two years or less. While not related to oats, the grass produces plumes of seed that resemble the familiar cereal grain. "Those seed plumes used to be a popular item for home decorating, but today, sea oats are protected by law in Florida," Velasco said.

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