

From the Mid City Messenger

<http://midcitymessenger.com/2014/10/15/lake-pontchartrain-basin-foundation-celebrates-new-wetlands-on-bayou-st-john/>

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*By Chris Staudinger, special to Mid-City Messenger*

“There are no small restoration projects,” said Jerome Zeringue, standing near an area of wetlands that had just recently been planted along the mouth of Bayou St. John.

The governor’s top coastal official was celebrating a new project spearheaded by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, an organization dedicated to preserving wildlife in the area. The foundation had planted a half acre of the wetlands in order to increase biodiversity in the bayou and teach students about the disappearing worlds of the state’s coastal habitats.

The new bulrushes, sedges, and spartina grasses line both banks of the bayou between the Lakeshore Drive bridge and the large sector gate near the Spanish Fort ruins. At a press conference held Tuesday, environmentalists said the project has been a success so far, as plants are spreading more quickly than anticipated. Nine new species have now joined the six that were originally planted, according to Theryn Hankel, assistant director of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation coastal program.

“We planted them in March. It looked really sparse, and within a month, it was crazy... as a plant ecologist, I was surprised at how fast the plants spread,” Hankel said.

Fish and other creatures were visible swimming through the grasses and through plastic, microscope-like viewing devices that the group will use in their “School of Marsh” program.

Hankel expects those same fish will eventually find their way into Bayou St. John as lake water is more regularly allowed to pass through sector gates that have traditionally remained closed. The Orleans Levee District, she said, is “committed to opening these gates more often to really flush this bayou out and get nice oxygenated water in there and get nice organisms in the bayou.”

The dredging of the bayou mouth helped bolster the project and keep the \$60,000 price tag relatively low, officials said. Sandbags filled with sediment form a supporting barrier for the new marshes. Dredge spoil was also used to create a foundation for the marsh.

Andy Baker, wetland biologist with the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, said the sandbags were made out of environmentally-friendly geotextile fabric. The bags are stacked with patented spiked pads that provide stability and made to allow plant roots to grow through.

Over 250 volunteers worked for over 2,000 hours to fill and arrange 7500 geotextile sandbags and plant the wetlands, Baker said.

“This is a place where you can come see what a half acre of marsh looks like, approximately what’s lost every half hour here in Coastal Louisiana,” he added.