Veterans Memorial students get hands-on lesson on oysters

Seventh-graders from Veterans Memorial School in Vineland recently assisted Hurricane Sandy "victims" of a different sort — the oyster beds in the Delaware Bay, according to Emily Diaz-Chard and Betty Slusarczyk, science teachers.

According to information provided by the teachers, oysters need hard substrate for their larvae to settle on and grow. Without these, oyster offspring will not survive.

Many of the established oyster reefs were destroyed by Hurricane Sandy this past fall. With the help of Jenny Paterno from Project PORTS, the students bagged clam shells in nylon net bags.

The bags will be transported to a designated spot in the Delaware Bay in time for oyster breeding season.

Oysters are a keystone species in the ecology of the bay. They provide food and habitat for other species and are an essential filtering system for the estuary.

Project PORTS is an education program for elementary and middle school students along the Delaware Bay Shore.

The strategy of Project PORTS is to promote hands-on activities that present basic scientific concepts and emphasize the local significance of the issues surrounding the oyster resource.

Project PORTS has three main components: oyster-focused in-class enrichment programs; a community-based restoration component that engages school communities in a real world oyster restoration project; and workshops for educators.

Project PORTS community-based restoration project engages school children in activities associated with the enhancement of oyster habitat at the Gandy's Beach Oyster Restoration Enhancement Area. Students construct shell bags, which are deployed in the bay to become a settlement surface, and home to millions of young oysters.

Participating schools, PORTS Partner Schools, receive a truckload of calm shells, which are placed in stretchy mesh bags by students on site at the school. The bags are then transported to a lower Bay Cape Shore site where they are deployed for two months in the summer to capture the settling oysters known as spat. The oyster spat and shell are transplanted to the upper Bay Gandy's Beach location where they will remain to grow, thrive and provide important ecological benefits to the bay ecosystem.

This work complements the State and Federal fishery-centered restoration efforts and demonstrates a way that local citizens can invest in the Delaware Bay and feel a personal commitment for its stewardship.