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Inmate David Powell helps to build an oyster cage at the Maryland Correctional Institution south of Hagerstown. (Credit: By Yvette May / Staff Photographer)

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Inmates housed at a prison south of Hagerstown make oyster cages as part of an effort to save the Chesapeake Bay. (Credit: Erin Julius / Reporter)

On Thursday, three inmates in their 60s, all serving life sentences, worked assembly-line style to fashion the cages out of sheets of wire, attach signs printed by another MCE division and tie on rope.

“It’s a team thing, a team effort,” said Elmer Skaggs, 64, who has been at MCI since 1985.

The three men make between 200 and 250 oyster cages a day, Skaggs said.

They work four 10-hour days per week, and make between \$2 and \$3.80 per day, depending on their experience, Haupt said. Their shift starts about 5:30 a.m.

Since they’ve started, 1,684 oyster cages have been shipped. Another 2,000 are to be shipped next week, Haupt said.

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Inmates make oyster cages to boost Bay

By ERIN JULIUS
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WASHINGTON COUNTY — Inmates at the Maryland Correctional Institution south of Hagerstown are making oyster cages for a project designed to help restore Chesapeake Bay.

The thrust of the restoration project, which was initiated last year by Gov. Martin O’Malley, is twofold — grow young oysters — known as spat — to replenish the bay’s population and filter the bay’s water.

Maryland Correctional Enterprises (MCE), the prison industry arm of the Maryland Division of Correction, has an order to make 5,000 oyster cages, said Greg Haupt, MCE regional manager for Hagerstown. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) provided the materials and pays \$2 per cage, Haupt said.

This project is different from others he's worked on in the prison's metal shops, Skaggs said.

"The purpose of what we're doing, I believe, is giving something back for the environment," he said.

Before he was incarcerated, Charlie Kennedy, 68, was a truck driver. He's been working in metal shops at the prison for 6 1/2 years and has been working on the oyster cages since the project began about a month ago, he said.

"I pray people get more interested in this type of project," he said. "It's something they should have done a long time ago."

David Powell, 67, was attaching yellow signs emblazoned with the words "Oysters for Restoration Only. Not for Human Consumption" to the cages on Thursday.

"I think it's a good project if it works," he said.

A large adult oyster can filter up to two gallons of water an hour, according to information available at the DNR's Web site.

Waterfront property owners willing to become caretakers will be given the cages full of oysters grown by DNR to tend for the first year of the oysters' lives, until they are large enough to be placed in a protected oyster sanctuary where harvesting is not allowed, according to the DNR Web site.

Oyster cages expose spats to oxygen and phytoplankton, which is their food source, and helps produce healthy mature oysters for Chesapeake Bay restoration, according to the Maryland Sea Grant College Web site at www.mdsg.umd.edu. The cages also offer protection from predators, according to the Web site.

About 10 percent of Maryland's inmates work for MCE, said Mark Vernarelli, spokesman for the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. The recidivism rate of inmates who worked for MCE is 55 percent lower than the general Division of Correction population, according to information provided by prison officials.

In Hagerstown, about 300 inmates work in the various MCE shops.

"The ultimate goal is to change lives," Haupt said.

Most inmates eventually will be released, and once they do, they will need jobs.

"They might not make cages, but they know to get up to work every day," Haupt said. "They know to answer to a supervisor."

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