Great Lakes Fishery Commission

For Immediate Release
October 16, 2025

Contact: Greg McClinchey
226-980-9193

CHANNEL ISLAND REEF CONSTRUCTION IN SAGINAW BAY
INCREASING FISH SPAWNING HABITAT AND RESILIENCE ALONG NORTHEAST SHORELINE

ANN ARBOR, MI—A newly constructed nearshore rock reef by Channel Island in Saginaw Bay is poised to increase fish habitat and improve resilience along the bay's northeast shore.

Built through community collaboration and with support from state, federal, and local partners, the Channel Island Reef will provide critical spawning grounds for native fish, complement the successful offshore Coreyon Reef, and help ensure that Saginaw Bay's fisheries remain healthy, resilient, and productive for years to come.

Construction of the Channel Island Reef began on September 8, 2025, and was completed on October 10. A barge deposited over 20,000 tons of natural limestone cobble from a local quarry on the bay floor to form a long, narrow rock mound. The new 2.5-acre reef is located 0.5 miles east of Channel Island, 2 miles from the mouth of the Saginaw River (coordinates: 43° 40.07289' N, 83° 48.15168' W), and is approximately 570 feet long and 190 feet wide. It rises approximately 3–4 feet above the existing lake bottom and sits at least 5.5 feet below the water's surface, even when water levels are low. Boaters and anglers should exercise caution when navigating near the new reef.

Lake Huron's Saginaw Bay is home to rich habitats full of fish, birds, plants, and other life. Many native fish use nearshore rocky or protected areas for spawning (laying and fertilizing their eggs). Historically, inner Saginaw Bay had plenty of rocky underwater mounds, or reefs, formed by glacial deposits that provided safe areas for native fish to spawn. Crevices among the rocks protected eggs and young fish from predators and strong currents until they were large enough to swim into the open waters of Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron.

However, over time, human development placed increased demands on the land around Saginaw Bay. Timber harvest, intensive agriculture, and industrial development led to elevated sedimentation—soil and other particles carried by the water—in the bay, smothering the rocky reefs. Without active restoration, fish populations and the resilience of the bay's fisheries remain at risk.

Building new rock reef habitat is a key strategy for restoring healthy fish populations and maintaining resilient fisheries in Saginaw Bay. Projects and locations are chosen and studied carefully to make sure they would be a wise use of funds and effort while meeting local needs. The Channel Island Reef location

was identified through bottom mapping and computer models of wind, wave, and sediment movement. The nearby island partially consists of dredged material, so project partners also sampled multiple potential locations for the proposed reef to make sure the reef was located away from contaminated sediments.

Community engagement was a critical part of the project and location selection process. Project partners worked with nearby residents and community leaders to generate a shared vision for the Channel Island Reef project and other proposed projects in the area. Through workshops and meetings, the project team and community representatives identified the Channel Island Reef as a priority location. Support and buy-in from local entities like Bay County and the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee were essential to the project's successful completion.

Now that construction has finished, project partners will begin monitoring fish activity at the site. This new reef will promote successful reproduction for multiple native fish species, including lake whitefish, walleye, lake trout, burbot, and more. Saginaw Bay is recognized as a vital stronghold for lake whitefish, a species declining across most of the Great Lakes. Diversifying spawning locations for fish also helps make populations more resilient against pressure from invasive species, pollution, and habitat loss. The project also aligns with specific management and restoration goals, including Lake Huron Fish Community Objectives, the Lake Huron Lakewide Action and Management Plan, and recommendations in the Walleye and Yellow Perch Recreational Management Plan for Saginaw Bay.

The Channel Island Reef provides a nearshore complement to Coreyon Reef, a restored offshore reef constructed in 2019 about 11 miles from shore. Researchers with Purdue University, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy documented both lake whitefish and walleye spawning on Coreyon Reef, along with other species of fish observed on the rocky structure. Coreyon Reef is now a popular fishing site. Both reefs—Channel Island and Coreyon—have an exclusion zone for commercial fishing. The Channel Island Reef was funded through federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funds from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Dow Chemical Natural Resources Damage Assessment and Restoration settlement.

"It is truly outstanding when multiple agencies come together to address priority habitat projects," said Marc Gaden, executive secretary of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission. "This reef—the result of multiple levels of government working toward a shared objective—will enhance production for many different species that support important fisheries in Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron."

"The natural resource trustee agencies are thrilled that this project may significantly increase fish reproduction in Saginaw Bay," stated John Riley, environmental quality specialist with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. "Fishing is vital to the region. The constructed reef will help improve the available catch and strengthen links in the food chain."

"Saginaw Bay once had all kinds of fish habitat—coastal wetlands, connected tributaries, and rocky reefs—and each one mattered," explained Jeff Jolley, fisheries biologist with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. "Logging, farming, industry, and other land use changes led to the loss of many of those areas. This reef restoration is a step toward bringing that good habitat back—for the fish, and for the people of this community who are proud to see their Bay thrive once again."

To learn more about construction of Channel Island Reef and other restoration work, read the article, "Rebuilding the Reefs of Saginaw Bay: A Collaborative Effort to Restore Fish Habitat and Coastal Health."

Channel Island Reef construction involved many partners, including the Michigan Department of Natural Resources; Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; Great Lakes Fishery Commission; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Environmental Consulting & Technology, Inc; LimnoTech; Walsh Service Solutions, LLC; Ryba Marine; and Purdue University. Michigan Sea Grant and Michigan State University Extension contributed to project outreach and community engagement.

A variety of grant funds supported construction of Channel Island Reef, demonstrating broad confidence and shared investment in this project. These funding sources are the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation—Coastal Resilience Fund, and Dow Chemical Natural Resources Damage Assessment and Restoration settlement money, which supported feasibility studies, construction, and ongoing monitoring.

For more information, contact:
Jeff Tyson, Great Lakes Fishery Commission, jtyson@glfc.org
Jeff Jolley, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, JolleyJ1@michigan.gov
Bretton Joldersma, Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, joldersmab@michigan.gov

Project partners holding signed rocks, which are now part of the new Channel Island Reef.
Credit: Jill Wingfield, Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

Additional photos can be viewed in the Channel Island Reef Construction Flickr album, and a video of construction can be viewed online.

The Great Lakes Fishery Commission is an international organization established by the United States and Canada through the 1954 Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries. The commission has the responsibility to promote measures that protect and improve the multi-billion-dollar Great Lakes fishery. Visit online at www.glfc.org

-30-

Great Lakes Fishery Commission
2200 Commonwealth Blvd, Suite 100
Ann Arbor, MI, 48105
734.662.3209
glfc.org