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Florida group begins to restore damaged seagrass beds

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MARATHON, Fla. -- A program to restore 4,000 square feet of damaged seagrass beds in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary near the Seven Mile Bridge began on Tuesday.

Most shallow-water seagrass damage is caused unintentionally by power boaters who stray outside of navigable channels and plow through shallows leaving trenches and ravaging seagrass, said Dave Score, the sanctuary's superintendent.

To repair prop scars, divers placed sediment tubes made of biodegradable cotton and filled with sand and organic material in the scar. The tube quickly disintegrates, releasing calcium carbonate responsible for grass re-growth and a healthy floor bottom.

After the sediment tubes are in place, it takes 18 to 24 months for complete grass re-growth, according to Jeff Beggins, president of Seagrass Recovery that is working with The Ocean Foundation, the project's funding source.

Beggins said seagrass plays an important part in the overall health of the nation's coastlines, helping address climate change.

"People like sitting here (in the Keys), having their conch fritters, watching the fish," said Beggins. "It's all interdependent on the seagrass habitat.

"As those go away, you'll see a depleting fishery, fish counts and it all comes down to the state of the overall economy," he said.

The Ocean Foundation, which is funding the program from corporate and private contributions, plans additional seagrass restoration efforts in other parts of Florida, New York, California and Washington State.