



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Large Research Vessel deployed as Artificial Reef in Northwest Florida through wide-reaching Tourism Collaboration**

**Okaloosa County, Florida** – The northern Gulf of Mexico has a new addition to its extensive artificial reef system with the deployment of the 239-foot R/V DEEP STIM III. The vessel, deployed on Jan. 30, 2024, joins hundreds of other artificial reefs already deployed off the shores of Northwest Florida and will serve as a haven to support various marine species while simultaneously providing the fishing and diving industry with an additional resource.

The successful deployment of R/V DEEP STIM III was accomplished through a Tri-County partnership between Tourist Development Councils in Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Panama City Beach and Walton County. Emerald Coast Reef Association and South Walton Artificial Reef Association provided funding for additional reef modules that were placed on the deck of the vessel adding to the complexity of the new site. Coastal Conservation Association provided funds for the towing fees necessary for deployment.

“This collaborative effort is an example of excellence in Northwest Florida and a guide for future successes,” said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Paul Mixon. “We look forward to many more opportunities that will allow our tourism industry to thrive, while also creating a sustainable aquatic ecosystem benefitting marine life, tourists and locals.”

The majority of the vessel deck sits at about 100 feet, ideal for an advanced dive experience. In addition to diving, the 65-foot high-relief site will provide an outstanding fishing location and habitat for popular species like amberjack. The added reef modules enhance the overall habitat and will attract fishing favorites such as grouper and snapper.

“While fishing has always been at the heart of our region’s history, creating sites that increase scuba diving opportunities is something we look forward to continue to develop. Collaborating with neighboring counties and communities on a large artificial reef project like this not only creates essential habitat off our coast but certainly moves the needle on establishing our area as a leader in adventure tourism,” said Alex Fogg, Coastal Resource Manager for Destin-Fort Walton Beach.

The deployed vessel will benefit a wide range of coastal communities. It is located about 22 NM from the Destin East Pass, 29 NM from St. Andrews Pass and 16.5 NM south of Walton County.

“This collaborative effort with Okaloosa and Bay counties to provide a new artificial reef serves to illustrate what great things can be accomplished when we work together for the benefit of our residents and visitors alike,” said Walton County Commission Chairman William McCormick.

While the Tri-County partnership involves three counties, large reef deployments like the DEEP STIM III have the potential to draw in adventure seekers from beyond the borders of our counties and the state of Florida.

"The Gulf of Mexico serves as a shared resource among our destinations, and we are thrilled to collaborate with our partners on this artificial reef project, said Visit Panama City Beach President and CEO Dan Rowe. "In addition to benefitting our region's diverse marine life, this joint effort will enhance the spectacular diving opportunities for all residents and visitors in Panama City Beach."

- Coordinates: DEEP STIM III artificial reef is located at: 30° 03.035' N, 86° 17.758' W
- Photos/Video: View photos and video from the deployment [HERE](#).

Destin-Fort Walton Beach Panama City Beach, and Walton County Tourism are destinations that foster ecological stewardship and embrace the fishing and diving opportunities provided in the Gulf of Mexico.

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#### **About Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Florida**

[www.destinfbw.com](http://www.destinfbw.com)

Captivating sugar-white sand beaches and emerald-green waters await in Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Located in Northwest Florida, the destination is not only an ideal place to unwind and experience total relaxation along a 20-mile stretch of beach, but to uncover the adventurous side within. The family-friendly locale offers an environment of discovery to play and explore, inviting kids to get on the water and give their adventurous side room to grow. Visitors enjoy pristine beaches, Gulf-to-Table seafood, abundant watersport activities, championship golf, lively nightlife, and numerous attractions, festivals and events designed to thrill all ages.

#### **About Panama City Beach**

[www.visitpanamacitybeach.com](http://www.visitpanamacitybeach.com)

Panama City Beach is situated on 27 miles of sugar-white sand beaches bordering clear, emerald-green waters where the Gulf of Mexico and St. Andrew Bay converge. With 320 days of sunshine annually and attractions such as St. Andrews State Park and Pier Park, the region has long been favored by travelers seeking an affordable beach vacation with year-round offerings for families, couples, groups and adventure-seekers. These include championship golf courses, spas, sporting events, award-winning dining and diverse recreational activities.

#### **About Walton County Tourism**

<https://www.visitsouthwalton.com/>

Located in Northwest Florida, Walton County is known for its 26 miles of sugar-white sand beaches, turquoise water, unique beach neighborhoods, and its historical and ecological wonders. From internationally recognized events to hundreds of miles of hiking and biking trails, and North America's first underwater museum of art, outdoor adventures are all within easy reach.

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