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Board of County Commissioners

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FORCE BLUE and Okaloosa County Team Up to Remove Over 1,000 Pounds of Marine Debris From 10 Destin-Fort Walton Beach Artificial Reefs

Okaloosa County, Florida – Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources Team partnered with FORCE BLUE, a nonprofit organization of U.S. military veteran combat divers, on a marine debris removal mission targeting 10 sites within the Destin-Fort Walton Beach artificial reef system. Over the course of the mission, divers recovered 1,022.93 pounds of debris from the reefs, including an estimated 40 pounds of derelict fishing line, conservatively estimated at roughly 64,000 linear feet, or approximately 12 miles.

The artificial reef system off Destin-Fort Walton Beach is one of the largest in the nation, drawing divers and anglers from across the country and supporting a significant share of the region's marine tourism economy. Left unaddressed, derelict fishing line and other debris accumulate on reef structures over time, entangling marine life, damaging habitat, and posing a hazard to the divers and anglers who rely on these reefs.

"We take the responsibility of being good stewards of the environment very seriously," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "Partnering with FORCE BLUE to maintain our growing artificial reef system is a great collaboration that prioritizes both the marine habitat and the well-being of our veterans."

Though fishing line made up a comparatively small share of the debris removed by weight, its ecological footprint is disproportionately large. Nearly invisible underwater, fishing line continues to entangle fish, sea turtles, and marine mammals long after it is lost or discarded, a phenomenon commonly known as "ghost fishing." The material can take years to break down. The 12-mile estimate uses a conservative assumption of heavier, 100-pound test line; lighter or braided line recovered in the same haul would represent significantly more linear footage per pound.

"Forty pounds of fishing line sounds small next to a thousand-pound total, but by our conservative estimate that's about 12 miles of line that can pose a threat to marine life and these habitats," said Danielle Lasseigne, Coastal Resources Coordinator for Okaloosa County. "This material doesn't weigh much, but it does a disproportionate amount of damage the longer it stays on the reef. Partnerships like this one with FORCE BLUE let us tackle that problem directly, and they help us document the ongoing maintenance our reef system needs to keep supporting healthy fish populations and a strong diving community."

This marks the sixth mission FORCE BLUE has conducted in partnership with Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Past missions have included living shoreline creation, invasive lionfish removals, and additional marine debris removal efforts across the area's reef system and Destin East Pass jetties. Funding for this mission was generously provided to FORCE BLUE through a Publix cash register campaign.

FORCE BLUE is a nonprofit that recruits and trains U.S. military special operations veterans and first responders as professional divers, pairing their skills with hands-on marine conservation work. Beyond

each mission's environmental impact, the organization gives veterans a renewed sense of purpose and community following their service, channeling their training toward restoring reefs, shorelines, and marine ecosystems that coastal communities depend on.

“Our divers train for exactly this kind of mission, methodical, structure-heavy dives where visibility and current can change fast,” said Ricky Brown, FORCE BLUE Mission Leader. “The Destin-Fort Walton Beach reef system is an impressive resource, and it was clear from the amount of debris we recovered how much value there is in doing this work regularly. We’re proud to give these veterans a continued mission, and we’re grateful to Okaloosa County for making this partnership possible.”

Okaloosa County's Natural Resources team manages one of the largest artificial reef programs in the country, with dozens more artificial reef construction projects currently underway. The county continues to pursue partnerships with research institutions and conservation organizations to support the long-term health of its reef system.

For more information on Okaloosa County's artificial reef program, visit the [Tourist Development Department's Natural Resources page](#).

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