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'Reef Balls' could boost fishing off Dixie County

By **KAREN VOYLES**

Staff Writer

CROSS CITY — Dixie County's leaders are getting ready to give net fishermen a small financial boost while improving recreational fishing off the coastline.

Net fishermen will be out of the business July 1 when a constitutional ban on net fishing takes effect. The county commission and school board are proposing to hire the netters to help expand an existing artificial reef. Commissioners have already voted to spend some money on the project, and school board members are scheduled to vote on the matter within a week.

The idea is to mold half-round shapes out of concrete and sink them in the Gulf of Mexico on a 22-acre site 10 miles southwest of Horseshoe Beach. Dixie County received permission from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers two years ago to begin building the artificial reef.

In 1993, using a \$25,000 state grant, the county sank limerock, heavy metal and some concrete into 30 piles — each pile weighing about 40 tons — and covering three-quarters of an acre, said David Osteen, a volunteer working on the project.

Fish are attracted to underwater structures, Osteen said, and "what we wanted was a place where fishing guides know that there will be fish." The project was paid for with

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DAVID OSTEEEN, PROJECT VOLUNTEER

grant money from the state's saltwater-fishing license fund.

Holly Houghton, Dixie County's agricultural extension agent, said that in addition to attracting anglers and perhaps divers, the county eventually may be able to use the artificial reef for aquaculture education.

Barber's brainstorm

To further develop the reef, Osteen and Houghton called in Todd Barber, founder of Reef Ball Development Group Ltd. of Doraville, Ga. Barber began considering how to build artificial reefs to replace a reef he first saw as a teen. On a family vacation to the Cayman Islands in the 70s, he saw a reef that intrigued him, but when he went back in 1992, it had been destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert.

That's what inspired him to develop and construct a sometimes-buoyant and inexpensive artificial reef. See REEF on Page 3B.