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Seagrass Recovery in Sarasota Bay Earns 1st Place Gulf Guardian Award for Sarasota Bay Estuary Program Partners and Citizens

Sarasota, FL. – The Gulf of Mexico Program recently awarded the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program Interlocal Partners and Citizens a first place Gulf Guardian Award for 2009 in the Partnership Category. The health of Sarasota Bay has seen significant gains since it was named an estuary of national significance by the US Congress in 1989. Water quality has improved substantially, including decreases in nitrogen pollution by approximately 50 percent. In 2009, all major segments of Sarasota Bay proper met water quality standards and were removed from the state list of impaired water bodies. Seagrass coverage — a primary indicator of Bay health and water quality — has increased 46 percent since 1988 and is presently at 130 percent of 1950 levels.

Seagrass recovery is a major element of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for Sarasota Bay. Seagrass habitat decreased by 30 percent from 1950 to 1988 as a result of declines in water clarity and dredge-and-fill operations. In 1995, a pollutant loading reduction goal of 48 percent for total nitrogen was set by the Sarasota Bay community. The results have been significant.

Recent data indicates that the Bay has had a 50 percent reduction in pollution, mainly as a result of wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) improvements, consolidation of WWTPs and septic tank replacement. More than 50 percent of the wastewater from wastewater treatment plants is currently reclaimed for alternative use. Stormwater projects have also been implemented regionally to reduce pollution. Fertilizer ordinances have been passed prohibiting nitrogen and phosphorus application during the summer rainy season. Watershed stewardship is a focus supporting the Florida Yards and Neighborhood Program.

The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program partners include U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Southwest Florida Water Management District,

Manatee and Sarasota Counties, City of Sarasota, City of Bradenton, Town of Longboat Key, City of Bradenton Beach, City of Holmes Beach and Anna Maria Island. The Citizens Advisory Committee provides a mechanism for structured citizen input to the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program and assists in disseminating relevant information to the public. Much of this information is to help make the public aware that what they do in their everyday lives effects the quality of the water in Sarasota Bay. The CAC also develops action plans to communicate SBEP activities and strives to influence public policies that affect the Bay and its resources.

The Gulf of Mexico Program initiated the Gulf Guardian awards in 2000 as a way to recognize and honor the businesses, community groups, individuals, and agencies that are taking positive steps to keep the Gulf healthy, beautiful and productive. The Gulf of Mexico Program began in 1988 to protect, restore, and maintain the health and productivity of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem in economically sustainable ways. The Gulf of Mexico Program is underwritten by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is a non-regulatory, inclusive consortium of state and federal government agencies and representatives of the business and agricultural community, fishing industry, scientists, environmentalists, and community leaders from all five Gulf States. The Gulf Program seeks to improve the environmental health of the Gulf in concert with economic development.

Helping the community make sustainable choices for today and tomorrow is an integral part of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program's outreach mandate. To view the Gulf Guardian Award video about the return of seagrass to Sarasota Bay visit <http://www.sarasotabay.org/mediacenter.html>.

The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program is dedicated to restoring the area's greatest natural asset—Sarasota Bay. Its unique program strives to improve water quality, increase habitat and enhance the natural resources of the area for use and enjoyment by the public. Sarasota Bay is one of 28 estuaries in the United States that have been named by the U.S. Congress as an "estuary of national significance."