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## **Return of Seagrasses Indicate Sarasota Bay Health is Improving: *Findings Released to Coincide with “Seagrass Awareness Month”***

**SARASOTA, FL – March 20, 2008** Seagrasses are so vital that Governor Charlie Crist has proclaimed March “Seagrass Awareness Month.” In 2006, seagrass communities in Florida supported an estimated harvest of \$71,400,000 for six seagrass-dependent, commercial fish and shellfish species. The seagrass community of Florida is reported as being “the largest seagrass meadow in the world.”

The regeneration of seagrasses in Sarasota Bay indicates that water quality is improving. This positive trend is reported by the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (SBEP), which regularly monitors seagrass coverage as an indicator of water quality. Aerial photographs in combination with on-the-ground verification reveal that the Bay now supports 9,855 acres of seagrass beds. This represents a significant gain of 5,587 acres of new or improved seagrass beds since historical lows in 1988 primarily as a result of declines in water clarity and dredge-and-fill operations.

“This could be the tipping point,” says SBEP Senior Scientist Gary Raulerson. “The increase in seagrass coverage supports that the Bay is much healthier than it was 20 years ago.” Seagrasses are not only a sensitive indicator of water quality but also a critical marine habitat for juvenile fish, affording them protection from predators as well as bountiful feeding opportunities.

The regeneration of seagrasses in Sarasota Bay shows that the estuarine system is responding to the projects outlined in SBEP’s Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan designed to reduce pollution, nutrient levels and improve habitat. Since the inception of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program in 1989, nitrogen pollution has been reduced by approximately 50 percent. This reduction is mainly due to improvements in the treatment of wastewater. Now stormwater runoff is the main source of pollution for the Bay accounting for approximately 61% of the nitrogen pollution.

Today stormwater run-off is the number one pollution concern to the Sarasota Bay estuary. When rainfall washes across the watershed it collects the debris and residue of our daily lives and becomes stormwater run-off. The treatment of stormwater is going to be key to the future restoration of Sarasota Bay.

*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."*

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