



SARASOTA BAY
ESTUARY PROGRAM
Restoring Our Bays

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SARASOTA BAY SEAGRASS HABITAT EXPANDS BY 51 ACRES

SARASOTA, FL – Sarasota Bay gained 51 acres of new seagrasses between 2008 and 2010 according to scientists with the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD). The effort to map seagrass acreage is managed by the District's Surface Water Improvement and Management Program (SWIM). This group uses aerial photographs and field research to estimate the acreage of seagrass in five gulf coast estuaries, including Sarasota Bay.

The increase over the past few years in Sarasota Bay is part of a longer term trend showing significant seagrass recovery. The current level of 12,692 acres is the highest level reported and is 25 percent above 1950. In 1988, the total acreage of seagrasses in Sarasota Bay was 8,650.

According to Mark Alderson, the Director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (SBEP), the recent findings are encouraging. "The additional acreage since 2008 is modest, but the overall trend continues to indicate significant progress," he said. "Sarasota Bay had a little more than 10,000 acres of seagrass in 1950. The increase in the total number of acreage is meaningful given the rapid growth of the region during the past 50 years."

Seagrass is an important feature of estuaries and a good barometer of the Bay's health. Seagrass growth depends on relatively clear water in order for light to reach the Bay floor where the various species of seagrasses grow. Seagrass also provides vital habitat for various fish species including sea trout, snook and redfish. Five species of

seagrasses are found in Sarasota Bay: shoal grass, turtle grass, manatee grass, widgeon grass, and star grass.

Sarasota Bay is a 56-mile long coastal lagoon comprised of one large bay segment (Big Sarasota Bay) and several smaller embayments including Palma Sola Bay in the north and Roberts Bay, Little Sarasota Bay, and Blackburn Bay to the south.

The report by SWIM indicates that four of the five embayments experienced modest increases in seagrass acreage with the highest increase in Little Sarasota Bay. Big Sarasota Bay saw a slight dip in the total number of acres.

According to Dr. Jay Leverone, SBEP's Staff Scientist, the data on seagrass acreage helps local resource managers determine the effectiveness of their water management strategies. "This information, combined with local water quality monitoring data, helps us measure progress as well as identify areas that might need more attention," he said.

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***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." Partners include Sarasota County, Manatee County, City of Sarasota, City of Bradenton, Town of Longboat Key, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Southwest Florida Water Management District, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.*