



410 Severn Avenue, Suite 109
Annapolis, Maryland 21403
voice 410-267-5700 • toll free 800-YOUR-BAY • www.chesapeakebay.net

PressRelease

For more information, contact Christopher Conner, 410-267-5758

2001 Underwater Grass Abundance in Chesapeake Bay at Record Levels *Annual survey shows vital grass habitat increases 27 % from previous year*

Washington, DC (October 31, 2002) – The distribution of Chesapeake Bay submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV), or bay grasses, reached the highest levels since tracking began in 1978 to an estimated 85,252 acres baywide in 2001, according to data released today by the Chesapeake Bay Program. Data gathered from the annual aerial survey shows that in areas surveyed in both 2000 and 2001, bay grass abundance increased by 27 percent.

While aerial surveys confirmed 77,805 acres of bay grasses (11,960 acres in the upper Bay, 43,473 acres in the middle Bay and 22,371 acres in the lower Bay), approximately 15 percent of the Bay and its tidal tributaries could not be fully mapped due to flight restrictions following the events of September 11. Based on SAV coverage in the 2000 survey, it is estimated these areas may have contained an additional 7,447 acres of grasses, bringing the baywide total to 85,252 acres.

When compared to areas surveyed in 2000, the data show a 10 percent increase in the upper Bay, a 49 percent increase in the middle Bay and a 7 percent increase in the lower Bay. The upper Bay area extends south from the Susquehanna River to the Chester and Magothy Rivers, while middle Bay areas extend from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge south to the Rappahannock River and Pocomoke Sound. The lower Bay includes areas south to the Bay's confluence with the Atlantic Ocean.

“Bay grasses have been called the miner's canary of the Chesapeake, sounding the alarm that danger is near,” said Chesapeake Executive Council Chair and District of Columbia Mayor Anthony A. Williams. “The increase in submerged aquatic vegetation, over one year, shows the Bay's resilience and proves how essential our non-point source programs are to the restoration of the Bay. We are optimistic that this year's increased acreage will provide grasses the jump-start needed to reach our 114,000 acre interim goal.”

Bay grasses are critical to the overall health of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem, as they produce oxygen, provide food for a variety of animals, provide shelter and nursery areas for a variety of fish and shellfish, reduce wave action and shoreline erosion, absorb nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen, and trap sediments.

Chesapeake Bay Underwater Grasses Reach Record Level 2-2-2

Improved water clarity from drier than normal conditions beginning in 2001 and improvements in water quality contributed to the highest levels since the baywide survey began in 1978, surpassing the previous record of 73,000 acres set in 1993.

The current drought situation has helped underwater grasses prosper by reducing the amount of nutrients and sediment flowing into the Bay and its rivers. The reduced flows have resulted in improved water clarity and reduced nutrient concentrations, both of which lead to better aquatic conditions for bay grasses.

“Large increases in the middle Bay region, driven by the propagation of widgeon grass and improved clarity from the drought, account for a significant proportion of this year’s increase,” said Professor Robert Orth of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and project leader of the annual bay grass survey. “The establishment of large stable beds during drought years is one of the keys to baywide resurgence of grasses. Once established, these areas may be better able to cope with the stress of reduced clarity and higher nutrient concentrations that result from higher rainfall years.”

Notable changes (greater than or equal to 20% and 12 acres) were observed in many Bay segments surveyed in both 2000 and 2001. In the upper Bay, increases occurred in the Bohemia, Sassafrass, and Lower Chester rivers, and the Upper Chesapeake Bay, while acreage in the Northeast River decreased. In the middle Bay, increases occurred in the Little Choptank, Honga, Big Annemessex, Lower Pocomoke, Upper and Lower Patuxent, Lower and Middle Potomac rivers, Eastern Bay, Central Chesapeake Bay and in the Mouth and Lower portion of the Choptank. A decrease occurred in the Upper Potomac River. In the lower Bay, increases occurred in the Upper and Lower Rappahannock, Corrotoman and Piankatank rivers and in the Mouth and Upper portions of the James. Decreases occurred in the Upper Pamunkey and Chickahominy rivers.

To accelerate bay grass protection and restoration, Bay Program partners are working with researchers and policymakers from across the region to develop a baywide strategy to increase the abundance of critical bay grass habitat. The strategy will focus on restoring water clarity in the Bay’s shallows, expanding protection of existing SAV beds, accelerating restoration activities, securing funding for SAV-related programs and enhancing existing research and public education activities.

For more information about Chesapeake Bay underwater grasses, including data for specific river systems and Baywide distribution maps, visit the Chesapeake Bay Program online Press Center at <http://www.chesapeakebay.net/press.htm>.

-30-

For more information, contact:

Christopher Conner, Chesapeake Bay Program Communications Director, 410-267-5758