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Water Quality Gets A Green Light, Again

Scientists Sampling the Bay Report Unprecedented Water Clarity

All major segments of Tampa Bay met water quality goals in 2013, for the second year in a row, as scientists collecting the data report unprecedented water clarity in many areas of the bay.

To help track seagrass recovery, the Tampa Bay Estuary Program annually compares water quality to established targets in the bay and reports the results through the "Decision Matrix." This simple report card uses a red, green and yellow color system to assess overall water quality in the bay. The rating system considers the amount of microscopic algae in the water (as indicated by chlorophyll a, a plant pigment), as well as the amount of visible sunlight penetrating the water column.

"Green" means a bay segment is meeting water quality targets, while "red" means it is not. "Yellow" indicates that the area bears watching.

The 2013 analysis shows a green light across the board for all four bay segments: Hillsborough Bay, Old Tampa Bay, Middle Tampa Bay, and Lower Tampa Bay. This means that water quality is good enough to foster continued recovery of underwater seagrasses that are the backbone of a healthy bay.

EPC teams conducting the sampling found entire bay segments last year where every station they tested had visible bottom – even in waters more than 30 feet deep, said Tom Ash, assistant director of the Water Management Division for the Environmental Protection Commission of Hillsborough County. EPC collects water quality data monthly from 45 sampling stations on which the annual assessments are based.

More information about the bay's overall health will come later this year when seagrass surveys conducted by the Southwest Florida Water Management District are released. The last surveys, covering 2010-2012, documented an increase of 3,250 acres, or more than 1,000 acres per year.

TBEP Scientist Ed Sherwood noted that aerial photographs taken this winter have shown patchy seagrass in an area of Feather Sound previously bare of vegetation -- a positive sign that likely stems from improved water clarity in that troubled area.

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Year	Old Tampa Bay	Hillsborough Bay	Middle Tampa Bay	Lower Tampa Bay
1975	Red	Red	Red	Green
1976	Red	Red	Red	Yellow
1977	Red	Red	Red	Red
1978	Red	Red	Red	Yellow
1979	Red	Red	Red	Red
1980	Red	Red	Red	Red
1981	Red	Red	Red	Red
1982	Red	Red	Red	Red
1983	Red	Yellow	Red	Red
1984	Red	Green	Red	Yellow
1985	Red	Red	Red	Yellow
1986	Red	Yellow	Red	Green
1987	Red	Yellow	Red	Green
1988	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Green
1989	Red	Yellow	Red	Yellow
1990	Red	Green	Red	Yellow
1991	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
1992	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow
1993	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow
1994	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red
1995	Red	Yellow	Red	Yellow
1996	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Green
1997	Yellow	Green	Red	Yellow
1998	Red	Red	Red	Red
1999	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow
2000	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow
2001	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow
2002	Yellow	Green	Green	Green
2003	Red	Yellow	Green	Yellow
2004	Red	Green	Green	Yellow
2005	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow
2006	Green	Green	Green	Green
2007	Green	Green	Green	Green
2008	Yellow	Green	Green	Yellow
2009	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green
2010	Green	Green	Green	Green
2011	Red	Green	Yellow	Green
2012	Green	Green	Green	Green
2013	Green	Green	Green	Green