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## Chesapeake Bay Grasses Declined by 25 Percent Last Year

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) - Underwater grasses in the Chesapeake Bay declined by a quarter last year, likely because of weather, according to a survey released Wednesday by a federal-state monitoring group.

The Chesapeake Bay Program's aerial surveys last year showed the underwater vegetation covered 59,090 acres in the bay, down about 25 percent from 72,263 acres in 2005. Grass coverage last year was the worst since 1989.

Underwater grass beds are important because they filter pollutants and provide habitat and food for blue crabs and other species prized by watermen.

"It's not a good picture in the bay right now," said Mike Fritz, acting associate director for ecosystems at the CBP.

Although scientists say it's hard to draw conclusions based on annual ups-and-downs in the coverage of underwater grasses, the most recent survey puts restoration efforts farther from a goal of having 185,000 acres of the bay covered by the grasses.

"In the aggregate, they're showing that we not making the progress we'd like to see," Fritz said.

Scientists attributed last year's grass declines in much of the bay to a dry spring, which raised salinity, and then a rainy June. Those June rains muddied the northern and middle portions of the bay for about a month, the CBP concluded.

In the southern third of the bay, scientists were most worried about the continuing decline in eelgrasses. Those grasses suffered in 2005 from high water temperatures.

"Many of the areas affected by the dieback in 2005 did not produce grass at all in 2006," scientists concluded.

Those southern grasses are especially important for blue crabs, Fritz said.

"At a critical life stage they are dependent upon those bay grasses in the lower bay for shelter, to grow to a large enough size so that they can migrate to other areas of the bay," he said.

A bright spot in the 2006 survey was the Susquehanna Flats, an area at the extreme northern tip of the bay. Scientists watch that area closely because fresh water that feeds the estuary travels through the Susquehanna Flats. A thick patch of grasses is good news for water quality farther south.

"The Susquehanna Flats area remained healthy and vibrant," said Robert Orth of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science in a statement.

The nonprofit Chesapeake Bay Foundation, which does not participate in the grasses survey, said the results show the need for increased restoration efforts. The Foundation is pushing this year for Maryland to approve a development fee to pump about \$130 million a year into Chesapeake restoration. That proposal has not yet been adopted by the legislature.

"Clearly water quality is playing a role in the demise of these natural grasses," said Beth McGee, senior water quality scientist for the group.

A longer report about the overall health of the bay is due from the Chesapeake Bay Program next month.

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