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### 10 percent increase seen in bay's grasses

But acreage of eel grass, safe haven for baby crabs, is well below average

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By LAWRENCE LATANE III  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

The Chesapeake Bay's aquatic grass acreage -- an important indicator of water quality -- grew by 10 percent in 2007 from the previous year.

But concerns about one grass species closely linked to the productivity of the declining blue crab population tempered the response of scientists who conducted the annual survey.

"There's some good news and some not-so-good news," said Robert Orth, Virginia Institute of Marine Science professor and survey chief.

Orth said wild celery and a variety of species continued to flourish in the Upper Potomac River and at the head of the bay on the Susquehanna Flats, but eel grass acreage that provides a safe haven for baby blue crabs in the lower bay is well below average.

All told, about 65,000 acres of grasses of approximately a dozen species grew on the bottom of the bay and its tributaries in 2007, compared with 59,000 acres the year before.

The 2007 number is well above the 20,000 acres found in 1984, but far short of a 185,000 goal set by Virginia, Maryland and their partners in a 20-year-old pollution cleanup effort.

Last year's bright spot was the continued increase in grasses in the Susquehanna Flats and the bay's freshwater tributaries. "We've seen the [freshwater] portions of the upper tributaries doing really well," said Lee Karrh, a Maryland scientist and chairman of a baywide submerged aquatic grasses study group.

He attributed the progress to last year's drought, which meant less polluted runoff draining into the bay from fertilized farm fields, city streets and suburban lawns. Gains in improved sewage treatment and improved farming techniques also mean better water quality for underwater grass growth, he said.

In Virginia, upper portions of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers showed increased grass growth, as well as the Chickahominy and the upper James rivers. The lower Rappahannock and its tributary, the Corrotoman River, also posted increases.

Eel grass recovered modestly from a dramatic die-off blamed on unusually high water temperatures in the summer 2005, the report said. Scientists remain concerned for the saltwater species that shelters baby crabs in the lower bay because it has disappeared in some areas.

"I don't know how it's going to fare," Orth said of eelgrass.

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