



OUR  
INDIAN  
RIVER  
LAGOON

## Sea grass recovering from algae

By Susan Burgess

Special to Treasure Coast Newspapers

After years of decline, a new aerial survey shows sea grass beds are thriving and expanding in the northern and central Indian River Lagoon.

A 12 percent gain in underwater meadow acres since 2011 shows the grass is bouncing back from a toxic algae bloom, according to results of a 2013 survey.

The South Florida Water Management District's aerial survey of the southern lagoon will be available in about a week.

A leading lagoon sea grass advocate greeted the news with cautious optimism.

"This is certainly positive news and a step in the right direction," said Richard Baker, president of the Pelican Island Audubon Society in Vero Beach. "But we need to continue to work on sources of nutrients like septic tanks."

### REBOUNDED

Without the underwater grass meadows, which serves as a nursery for small fish, water birds have a hard time finding food, and larger fish depart, leaving fishermen

### See SEA GRASS, 4A

empty-handed.

Sea grass meadows reached a high of just over 70,000 square acres in 2007. They dropped steadily after that, reaching a low point of 38,320 acres in 2011 during an intense summer algae bloom that blocked

sunlight the grass needed to thrive.

The grass, which also serves as grazing grounds for manatees, covers 4,763 acres more than it did in 2011, according to the St. Johns River Water Management District survey.

Although 39 percent of the sea grass in Volusia, Brevard and Indian River counties is still missing, the improved coverage means "sea grass is doing really well in the St. Johns district," said Charles "Chuck" Jacoby, the supervising environmental scientist for the district's estuary section.

### 2014 FORECAST

All indications are that it is continuing to do well in 2014, Jacoby said.

"Overall the improvement is an encouraging sign, but we're not home yet," he said.

The district's sea grass target is 80,000 square acres. The 2013 survey revealed just over half that many.

Ed Mangano, a clam farmer who spends a lot of time on the lagoon near the Sebastian Inlet, said the water there has been crystal clear.

"From 3 miles north of the inlet to 3 miles south of the inlet there is plenty of sunlight," he said.

That section of the lagoon is fairly stable, Jacoby said. Some sea grass was lost from the inlet area between 2009 and 2011, but there has been no dramatic change. The Banana River Lagoon in Brevard County was the big winner with more than 2,000 new acres of grass, he said.

"The increase in sea grass is an encouraging sign," Jacoby said. "I'm happy to see it making a comeback. But we don't know what will happen in the future. It may stay at this level for a while."

### WEATHER PREDICTIONS

The St. Johns scientists keep track of long-range weather predictions.

"There is some uncertainty about whether we are headed into an El Niño year, which typically means a cooler and wetter winter and slightly warmer summer with reasonable or above median rain-



fall,” Jacoby said. “Extra rain may affect water clarity, and in turn, sea grasses.”

The years between 1994 and 2009 were drier than normal, which meant less runoff, which in turn meant fewer pollutants like nitrogen in the lagoon to fuel algae blooms, Jacoby said.

“We think the key to sea grass growth is light and that growth is linked to the quality of the water. This season there has been a lot of light and that is good for the grass.”

The next aerial survey takes place in spring 2015, with results available in fall 2016.

## SEA GRASS ACRES

	2011	2013	Gain
<b>Mosquito Lagoon</b>	16,887	16,911	24
<b>Banana River Lagoon</b>	3,156	5,440	2,284
<b>North Indian River Lagoon</b>	15,239	16,238	999
<b>Central Indian River Lagoon</b>	3,038	4,494	1,456
<b>TOTAL</b>	38,320	43,083	4,763

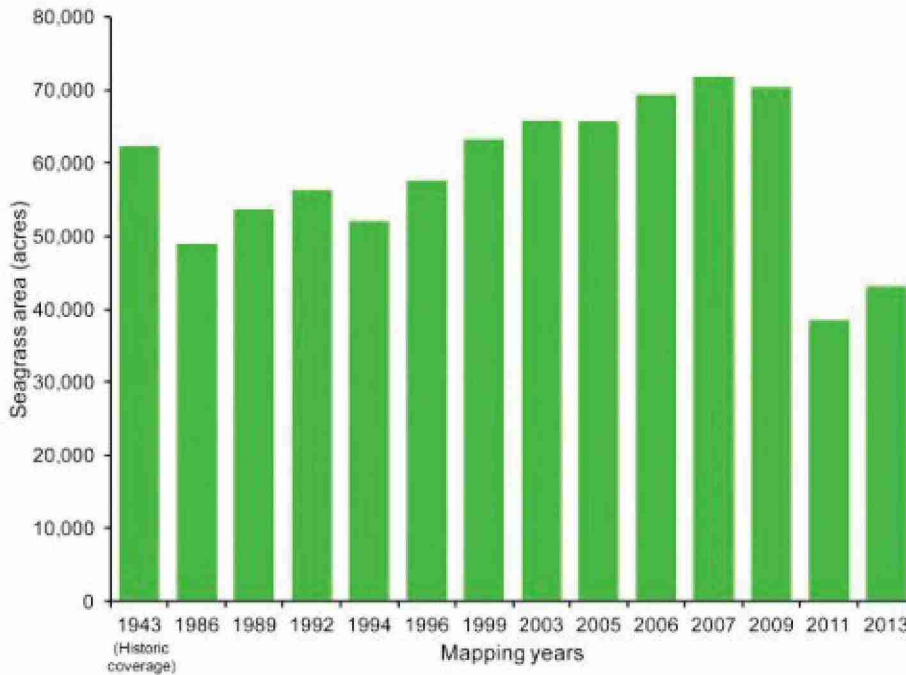
## SOUTHERN BOUNDARIES

**North lagoon:** About midway between the Pineda and Merritt Island causeways in Brevard County

**Central lagoon:** Southern Indian River County line

Source: St. Johns River Water Management District

## SEA GRASS ACRES SURVEY



Source: St. Johns River Water management District