



What's Threatening Eelgrass at Morro Bay Estuary?



What and Where is Morro Bay Estuary?

An estuary is where freshwater meets the salty sea. Estuaries form when rain runs off the land through rivers, streams, or groundwater, meets and mixes with saltwater from the ocean, and creates partially enclosed bodies of water along the coast. The Morro Bay Estuary is located in San Luis Obispo County, California, adjacent to California State Route 1 on California's Central Coast. The estuary is considered small at 2,300 acres, but spans enough to connect Morro Bay and Los Osos.

Why is Eelgrass Important and What is Threatening It?

Eelgrass is a flowering underwater plant with 1/4-inch wide leaves that can reach lengths of 3 feet. Eelgrass beds are important to the health of the estuary. They benefit coastal marine species like rock cod and migratory species like black brant. Since 2007, more than 95% of eelgrass in the bay has disappeared (shown in picture above) due to many natural and human-related factors. Natural factors include changing water depth, salinity, wave velocity, decreasing water clarity, pathogens, and grazing. Human activities can also negatively impact eelgrass, including dredging, introducing invasive species, disturbing the eelgrass with boat propeller blades or paddles, building docks and other structures over the eelgrass, and allowing harmful chemicals to enter the water through storm drains and other runoff.

What is Happening Now?

The Morro Bay Estuary Program completed three large-scale transplanting efforts during the summers of 2012, 2013, and 2014. Recent monitoring indicated minimal transplant survival. While the end result was not as successful as hoped, this work helped to inform continuing eelgrass research and restoration work in Morro Bay. In 2016, small patches of eelgrass in the mid-bay came back, indicating that conditions in that portion of the bay have improved for eelgrass. This demonstrates how difficult it is to repair an ecosystem after it has almost been completely destroyed.

Where Can You Get More Information About the Eelgrass?

More information is available at: <https://www.mbnep.org/eelgrass/>



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