

Media release

From the Office of the Environmental Monitor

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FISH FIND A HOME IN BAY'S SEAGRASS

Port Phillip Bay's seagrass beds continue to be important habitats for thousands of fish, according to a report from one of the Channel Deepening Project's environmental monitoring programs.

Victoria's Environmental Monitor Mick Bourke said the results from the *Baywide Monitoring of Key Fishery Species in Seagrass Beds* showed the numbers and types of fish found in seagrass beds were similar to previous years and within expected variability for the Bay.

"The program collects information on the type and number of fish species found in some of the Bay's shallow and deeper seagrass beds. The information collected helps Fisheries Victoria resource managers understand more about how fish in the Bay use seagrass during their lives," Mr Bourke said.

"Under the four year program, researchers carry out annual netting surveys of fish found in seagrass beds during autumn and spring. The results are then analysed against previous surveys to check for any change outside natural variability," he said.

The sampling occurs in seagrass beds located in the south of the Bay, including in the water off St Leonards, Blairgowrie and around Mud Islands.

Anthony Hurst, Acting Director Fisheries Victoria, said 38 fish species were identified during the autumn 2009 survey, in line with expectations based on previous surveys.

"The results show that the Bay's seagrass beds are home to a variety of fish species including the smallmouth hardyheads, wide-body pipefish and little rock whiting," Mr Hurst said.

"The monitoring program started last year and the results from the three surveys conducted so far are helping to build a better picture of how different types of fish use the Bay's seagrass over time.

"So far we have observed that distinctly different groups of fish occupy shallow and deep seagrass beds. Research suggests shallow seagrass may support greater numbers of small fish, such as the wide-body pipefish, than deep seagrass. This difference is likely because of fewer, large predators in shallower waters."

Mr Hurst said that the numbers of fish surveyed in autumn 2009 varied compared with estimates from the previous survey in spring 2008, depending on seagrass depth and location.

"The change in fish numbers in autumn compared to spring appears to be part of the natural pattern in the bay. Data collected from the next spring survey, scheduled for November 2009, will help make such patterns clearer," he said.

Mr Hurst said some species of fish found in previous surveys, including King George whiting and blue sprat, were not found in the latest survey.

"Seasonal variability is common. For example, small juvenile King George whiting found in shallow seagrass beds in spring 2008 had left by the autumn survey in 2009. Previous research has shown that King George whiting spawn in the winter, and larvae settle into shallow seagrass in the

spring. By the following autumn they have grown and moved onto sandy areas near seagrass beds,” he said.

“Seagrass is important for the Bay’s ecosystem because it provides food and shelter for a wide range of marine animals. The research shows us that thousands of fish are calling the Bay’s seagrass beds home, and that’s a great sign for the ongoing health of both the fish and the seagrass,” Mr Hurst said.

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