

**Chesapeake Bay Program | Indicator Analysis and Methods Document**  
*Bay Grass Abundance | Updated April 12, 2018*

Indicator Title: Bay Grass Abundance

Relevant Outcome(s): Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) Outcome

Relevant Goal(s): Vital Habitats

Location within Framework (i.e., Influencing Factor, Output or Performance):  
 Performance

**A. Data Set and Source**

(1) Describe the data set. What parameters are measured? What parameters are obtained by calculation? For what purpose(s) are the data used?

Submerged Aquatic Vegetation in Chesapeake Bay measures acreage and percent coverage measured from photographs during the aerial surveys (after photo-interpretation). Data are collected for tracking, research, and long-term monitoring purposes.

(2) List the source(s) of the data set, the custodian of the source data, and the relevant contact at the Chesapeake Bay Program.

- Source: [Virginia Institute of Marine Science via EPA grant, as well as grants from MD DNR, VA DEQ, and VA's CRM program.](#)
- Custodian: [Bob Orth, VIMS \(jjorth@vims.edu\)](#) or [David Wilcox, VIMS \(dwilcox@vims.edu\)](#)
- Chesapeake Bay Program Contact (name, email address, phone number): [Rich Batiuk, batuik.richard@epa.gov](#)

(3) Please provide a link to the location of the data set. Are metadata, data-dictionaries and embedded definitions included?

Please refer to [http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis\\_data.html](http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis_data.html) for the data set and related metadata for each year. For more information about the methods, special report, and bibliography, see question 27.

**B. Temporal Considerations**

(4) Data collection date(s): [Baywide: 1978-2017, excluding 1979-1983 \(partial surveys were conducted in Virginia\) and 1988 when no surveys were conducted. By zones: 1984-2017, excluding 1988 when no survey was conducted.](#)

(5) Planned update frequency (e.g., annual, biannual, etc.):

- Source Data: [annual](#)

- Indicator: [annual](#)

(6) Date (month and year) next data set is expected to be available for reporting: [April 2019](#)

### C. Spatial Considerations

(7) What is the ideal level of spatial aggregation (e.g., watershed-wide, river basin, state, county, hydrologic unit code)?

Data are aggregated to 92 tidal water segments for the Chesapeake Bay (2003 revised Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) segmentation and zonation scheme). These segments are further grouped by salinity zones and then aggregated to the bay-wide level.

(8) Is there geographic (GIS) data associated with this data set? If so, indicate its format (e.g., point, line polygon).

USGS 7.5 minute quadrangle maps are used to organize the mapping process. 258 quadrangles in the study area include all regions with potential for SAV growth.

(9) Are there geographic areas that are missing data? If so, list the areas.

Areas mapped include all regions with potential for SAV growth. Areas that do not have the potential for SAV growth are not mapped.

Spatial gaps also occurred in 1984 and 1986, primarily due to flight restrictions around Patuxent Naval Air Station and Aberdeen Proving Grounds. Estimates of acreage in the non-surveyed areas, primarily based on prior and subsequent year surveys, were developed for those years (1984 and 1986). Refer to section H for additional details.

Spatial gaps in 1999 occurred due to hurricane disturbance and subsequent inability to reliably photograph SAV. Spatial gaps in 2001 occurred due to post-nine-eleven flight restrictions near Washington D.C. Spatial gaps in 2003 occurred due to adverse weather in the spring and summer and Hurricane Isabel in the fall. Spatial gaps in 2011 occurred due to adverse weather in the summer. Estimates of acreage in the non-surveyed areas, based on prior year surveys, were developed for those years (1999, 2001, 2003, and 2011). Spatial gaps occurred in 2016 due to flight restrictions over military air space and adverse weather conditions.

See section H of this document for more details.

(10) Please submit any appropriate examples of how this information has been mapped or otherwise portrayed geographically in the past.

Refer to [http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav16/mapping\\_process.html](http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav16/mapping_process.html) for methods and <http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav15/quads/hh204th.html> for an example.

When 2017 data are finalized (expected at the end of calendar year 2018), this document will include the link to the relevant pages in the 2017 report.

#### D. Communicating the Data

(11) What is the goal, target, threshold or expected outcome for this indicator? How was it established?

- The baywide goal is to have 185,000 acres of underwater grasses in the Chesapeake Bay, with targets of 90,000 acres by 2017 and 130,000 acres by 2025. The SAV restoration goal is based on the known historical expanse of SAV in the Bay and its tributaries.
- Tidal Fresh Salinity Zone: 20,602-acre goal.
- Oligohaline Salinity Zone: 10,334-acre goal.
- Mesohaline Salinity Zone: 120,306-acre goal.
- Polyhaline Salinity Zone: 33,647-acre goal.

(12) What is the current status in relation to the goal, target, threshold or expected outcome?

Baywide: In 2017, there were an estimated 104,843 acres of underwater grasses in the Chesapeake Bay achieving 56% of the 185,000-acre goal. Current acreage is approximately half of known historical expanse.

- Tidal Fresh Salinity Zone: 19,880 acres in 2017 achieving 96% of the area's 20,602-acre goal.
- Oligohaline Salinity Zone: 8,398 acres in 2017 achieving 81% of the area's 10,334-acre goal.
- Mesohaline Salinity Zone: 61,331 acres in 2017 achieving 51% of the area's 120,306-acre goal.
- Polyhaline Salinity Zone: 15,234 acres in 2017 achieving 45% of the area's 33,647-acre goal.

(13) Has a new goal, target, threshold or expected outcome been established since the last reporting period? Why? No.

(14) Has the methodology of data collection or analysis changed since the last reporting period? How? Why? No.

(15) What is the long-term data trend (since the start of data collection)?

Baywide: Since 1984, SAV acreage has increased from 38,228 acres to 104,843 acres. Acreage has averaged 67,387 and ranged from 38,228 acres to 104,843 acres.

- Tidal Fresh Salinity Zone: increased from 6,911 to 19,880 acres. Acreage has averaged 13,025 and ranged from 6,900 acres to 25,481 acres.

- Oligohaline Salinity Zone: increased from 653 to 8,398 acres. Acreage has averaged 6,910 and ranged from 653 acres to 13,919 acres.
- Mesohaline Salinity Zone: increased from 15,636 to 61,331 acres. Acreage has averaged 30,641 and ranged from 15,636 acres to 61,331 acres.
- Polyhaline Salinity Zone: increased from 15,027 to 15,234 acres. Acreage has averaged 17,598 and ranged from 9,960 acres to 24,016 acres.

(16) What change(s) does the most recent data show compared to the last reporting period? To what do you attribute the change? Is this actual cause or educated speculation?

- Baywide acreage increased from 97,668 in 2016 to 104,843 acres in 2017.
  - Tidal Fresh Salinity Zone: increased from 17,417 acres to 19,880 acres.
  - Oligohaline Salinity Zone: decreased from 8,588 acres to 8,398 acres.
  - Mesohaline Salinity Zone: increased from 57,191 acres to 61,331 acres.
  - Polyhaline Salinity Zone: increased from 14,471 acres to 15,234 acres.
- In 2017, high density beds accounted for 44 percent of the total acreage, which is 6 percent lower than 2016.
- The increase in baywide SAV coverage in 2017 represents a continued recovery from strong declines in 2011 and 2012 that reduced SAV abundance to a level last reported for the Bay in 1986. The 2017 increase was the result of a strong increase in the Tidal Fresh Zone and smaller increases in the Mesohaline and Polyhaline zones.
- In 2017, the increase in the Mesohaline salinity zone is due primarily to a continuing rapid expansion of widgeongrass. However, this species has had boom and bust cycles throughout the history of this survey.
- In 2017, SAV increased in the Polyhaline salinity zone following a decrease in 2016 and several years of recovery of eelgrass in areas where the hot summers of 2005 and 2010 resulted in dramatic diebacks.
- Recent statistical modeling has strongly tied Chesapeake Bay SAV resurgence (through 2015) to reductions in nitrogen and phosphorus loadings (Lefcheck et al, 2018). The continued recovery of SAV in the Bay are evidence that nutrient reductions (by TMDL and other incentives) are resulting in a healthier Bay.

(17) What is the key story told by this indicator?

Baywide: In 2017, there were an estimated 104,843 acres of underwater grasses in the Chesapeake Bay achieving 56% of the 185,000-acre goal. See the answer to question 12 for progress towards goals for specific salinity zones.

The density classifications for the beds in 2017 are as follows:

- 44% of the beds had densities of 70-100%
- 42% of the beds had densities of 40-70%
- 11% of the beds had densities of 10-40%%
- 3% of the beds had densities of <10%

Underwater grasses provide significant benefits to aquatic life and serve many critical ecological functions in the Bay and its tributaries, such as:

- Providing shelter for young striped bass, blue crabs and other species
- Improving water clarity by helping suspended sediment particles settle to the bottom
- Adding oxygen to the water
- Reducing shoreline erosion

Scientists believe that having more grasses in the Bay and rivers will dramatically improve the entire ecosystem. The expectation is that as nutrient and sediment pollution decrease and water clarity improves, underwater grass acreages should expand. Experts closely monitor underwater grasses because their well-being is dependent on good local water quality. Therefore, their abundance is an excellent measure of the Bay's health.

Trends in the distribution and abundance of SAV over time are useful in understanding trends in water quality (Moore, et. al. 2004). Loss of SAV indicates poor water quality, whereas increases in SAV indicates improving water quality. Review of photographic evidence from a number of sites dating back to 1937 suggests that between 200,000 to 600,000 acres of SAV may have historically grown along the shoreline of the Bay (Moore, et. al. 2004). However, by 1984, the SAV community had fallen to a low of about 38,000 acres (Virginia Institute of Marine Science).

SAV abundance is now included in the water quality standards in Maryland and Virginia.

### **E. Adaptive Management**

(18) What factors influence progress toward the goal, target, threshold or expected outcome?

The loss of SAV from shallow waters of Chesapeake Bay, which was first noted in the early 1960s, is a widespread, well-documented problem (Batiuk, et al., 2000). Although other factors, such as climatic events and herbicide toxicity, may have contributed to the decline of SAV in the Bay, the primary causes are eutrophication and associated reductions in light availability (Batiuk, et. al., 2000). Like any other plant, SAV needs sunlight to grow and survive. Two significant pressures that impact the growth of SAV are sediment and excess nutrient pollution. Sediment (loose particles of clay and silt that are suspended in the water) makes the water cloudy and blocks sunlight from the

plants. Similarly, excess nutrients in the water fuel the growth of algae, which also block sunlight from the plants. When SAV lacks the sunlight it needs, it cannot survive.

Sea level rise and increase Bay water temperatures from climate change pose risks to achieving the goal, particularly in the polyhaline region of the Bay, and the workgroup has committed to, in their management strategy, advocating management approaches that reduce stressors so that SAV may be more resilient to the effects of climate change. See the management strategy at [http://www.chesapeakebay.net/documents/22042/2f\\_sav\\_6-24-15\\_ff\\_formatted.pdf](http://www.chesapeakebay.net/documents/22042/2f_sav_6-24-15_ff_formatted.pdf) for more information.

(19) What are the current gaps in existing management efforts?

The partnership lacks information about a number of restoration and protection research topics. See page 6 of the relevant management strategy at [http://www.chesapeakebay.net/documents/22042/2f\\_sav\\_6-24-15\\_ff\\_formatted.pdf](http://www.chesapeakebay.net/documents/22042/2f_sav_6-24-15_ff_formatted.pdf) for more information.

(20) What are the current overlaps in existing management efforts?

The SAV workgroup works closely with the Water Quality and Maintain Healthy Watersheds Goal Implementation teams, as water clarity and quality are factors that influence success.

(21) According to the management strategy written for the outcome associated with this indicator, how will we (a) assess our performance in making progress toward the goal, target, threshold or expected outcome, and (b) ensure the adaptive management of our work?

(a) The Partnership uses this data to assess progress towards the acreage goal for SAV by calculating what percentage of the goal has been reached and by identifying areas where the most progress needs to be made. Refer to the [ChesapeakeProgress](http://www.chesapeakeprogress.com/abundant-life/sav) (<http://www.chesapeakeprogress.com/abundant-life/sav>) for more information.

(b) Each year, the workgroup meets to review the data, track the progress, and discuss any new challenges or opportunities. These meetings provide a forum to review performance and adjust management strategies if appropriate based on identified trends, priority areas, and research needs.

## F. Analysis and Interpretation

*Please provide appropriate references and location(s) of documentation if hard to find.*

(22) What method is used to transform raw data into the information presented in this indicator? Please cite methods and/or modeling programs.

Please refer to [http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav16/calculation\\_sav\\_area.html](http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav16/calculation_sav_area.html). Refer also to [http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav16/mapping\\_process.html](http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav16/mapping_process.html) for tools used to develop Orthorectification and Mosaic Production, Photo Interpretation and Bed

Delineation in the 2016 report. When 2017 data are finalized, this document will include the link to the relevant pages in the 2017 report.

(23) Is the method used to transform raw data into the information presented in this indicator accepted as scientifically sound? If not, what are its limitations?

Yes. This indicator has undergone extensive technical and peer review by state, Federal and nongovernment organization partner members of the SAV workgroup. See [Chesapeake Bay SAV special reports at http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/SpecialReports.html](http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/SpecialReports.html) and bibliography at <http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/Bibliography/Bibliography.html>. The SAV distribution data files are located at [http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis\\_data.html](http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis_data.html). The SAV indicator is published at <http://www.chesapeakeprogress.com/abundant-life/sav>.

(24) How well does the indicator represent the environmental condition being assessed? The indicator uses direct measures of SAV, thus the indicator is directly representative of the environmental condition of bay grasses.

(25) Are there established reference points, thresholds, ranges or values for this indicator that unambiguously reflect the desired state of the environment?

Yes. Please refer to [Historical analysis of SAV in the Potomac River and Analysis of Bay-wide Historic SAV to establish a New Acreage Goal](http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/special_reports/Final_SAV_Historical_Report_2004.pdf). K. A. Moore, D. J. Wilcox, B. Anderson, T. A. Parham, and M. D. Naylor. Report to EPA Chesapeake Bay Program. April 2004 at [http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/special\\_reports/Final SAV Historical Report 2004.pdf](http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/special_reports/Final_SAV_Historical_Report_2004.pdf)  
Refer to page 12.

(26) How far can the data be extrapolated? Have appropriate statistical methods been used to generalize or portray data beyond the time or spatial locations where measurements were made (e.g., statistical survey inference, no generalization is possible)?

No statistical methods have been established to date for this program that would allow for extrapolation of data to areas where data isn't available, or to use limited data to estimate bay-wide totals in the absence of real data. The project team is, however, currently seeking funding opportunities to determine ways to use limited aerial imagery and SAV bed data in a statistically sound way to extrapolate to unmapped regions in the event of reduced funding for the survey.

## **G. Quality**

*Please provide appropriate references and location(s) of documentation if hard to find.*

(27) Were the data collected and processed according to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency-approved Quality Assurance Project Plan? If so, please provide a

link to the QAPP and indicate when the plan was last reviewed and approved. **If not, please complete questions 29-31.**

Yes. Data collection, analysis, and management methods are described in the Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) on file for the EPA grant to the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences (VIMS) and available at the VIMS web site ([http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav15/sav\\_qapp\\_2015.pdf](http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav15/sav_qapp_2015.pdf)). See Chesapeake Bay SAV special reports at <http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/Special Reports.html> and bibliography at <http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/Bibliography/Bibliography.html>.

(28) *If applicable:* Are the sampling, analytical and data processing procedures accepted as scientifically and technically valid? **N/A**

(29) *If applicable:* What documentation describes the sampling and analytical procedures used? **N/A**

(30) *If applicable:* To what extent are procedures for quality assurance and quality control of the data documented and accessible? **N/A**

(31) Are descriptions of the study design clear, complete and sufficient to enable the study to be reproduced? **N/A (see answer to question 27)**

(32) Were the sampling, analytical and data processing procedures performed consistently throughout the data record?

Some technical improvements (e.g., photo-interpretation tools) were made over the 30 years of the annual SAV survey in Chesapeake Bay. Surveyors and analysts have carefully evaluated the effect of methodological changes along the way and made corrections to adjust for any known effects. Quality assurance project plan for the EPA grant to the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences describes data collection, analysis, and management methods. This is on file at the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency Chesapeake Bay Program Office and available on the VIMS web site at [http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav15/sav\\_qapp\\_2015.pdf](http://www.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav15/sav_qapp_2015.pdf). Metadata are included with the data set at the VIMS web site [http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis\\_data.html](http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis_data.html).

(33) If data sets from two or more sources have been merged, are the sampling designs, methods and results comparable? If not, what are the limitations? **N/A**

(34) Are levels of uncertainty available for the indicator and/or the underlying data set? If so, do the uncertainty and variability impact the conclusions drawn from the data or the utility of the indicator?

Yes, levels of uncertainty are available. See the QAPP referenced in question 27 for more details. Metadata are included with the data set posted at the VIMS web site [http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis\\_data.html](http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/gis_data.html).

No, the uncertainty and variability do not impact the conclusions. Some technical improvements (e.g., photo-interpretation tools) were made over the decades of the annual SAV survey in Chesapeake Bay. Surveyors and analysts have carefully evaluated the effect of methodological changes along the way and made corrections to adjust for any known effects. Quality assurance project plan for the EPA grant to the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences describes data collection, analysis, and management methods. For more information, refer to the QAPP referenced in question 27.

(35) For chemical data reporting: How are data below the MDL reported (i.e., reported as 0, censored, or as < MDL)? If parameter substitutions are made (e.g., using orthophosphate instead of total phosphorus), how are data normalized? How does this impact the indicator? *N/A*

(36) Are there noteworthy limitations or gaps in the data record?

Spatial gaps also occurred in 1984 and 1986, primarily due to flight restrictions around Patuxent Naval Air Station and Aberdeen Proving Grounds. Estimates of acreage in the non-surveyed areas, primarily based on prior and subsequent year surveys, were developed for those years (1984 and 1986).

Due to funding constraints, there were partial surveys in the years 1979-1983 and no survey in 1988. Spatial gaps in 1999 occurred due to hurricane disturbance and subsequent inability to reliably photograph SAV. Spatial gaps in 2001 occurred due to post-nine-eleven flight restrictions near Washington D.C. Spatial gaps in 2003 occurred due to adverse weather in the spring and summer and Hurricane Isabel in the fall. Spatial gaps in 2011 occurred due to adverse weather in the summer. Estimates of acreage in the non-surveyed areas, based on prior year surveys, were developed for those years (1999, 2001, 2003, and 2011). Spatial gaps occurred in 2016 due to flight restrictions over military air space and adverse weather conditions.

Refer to section H for additional details.

#### **H. Additional Information (*Optional*)**

(37) Please provide any further information you believe is necessary to aid in communication and prevent any potential misrepresentation of this indicator. While the data presented here are geographically focused on the Chesapeake Bay, the data provider also collects information about SAV in Maryland's Coastal Bays, available at <http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/StateSegmentAreaTable.htm>.

2016: For 2016, 97,668 acres of SAV were mapped in Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. However, weather conditions and security restrictions in the DC area, over Patuxent Air Base and associated mid-Bay areas prevented acquisition of useable imagery for a portion of the tidal fresh and mesohaline Potomac River, including Piscataway Creek and St. Marys River. A small portion of this area was covered by NAIP imagery under conditions that were appropriate for mapping SAV. The area that was not fully mapped in 2016 supported 1,975 acres of SAV in 2015, 2% of the 2015 Bay total. The full report located at <http://web.vims.edu/bio/sav/sav16/index.html> will contain more details.

2011: Only 57,964 acres were mapped baywide in 2011. It is estimated that an additional 5,119 acres may have been present (for an estimated baywide total of 63,083), however, they could not be mapped since SAV signatures were masked by excess turbidity present months after the passage of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. The regions that were not mapped are contained within nine CBP segments, including the Middle, Upper and Western Branch of the Patuxent River; the Middle and Upper Potomac River; Piscataway Creek; and the Anacostia River. The estimated additional acreage is based on acreages mapped in those regions in 2010. Zone and density totals do NOT include estimated additional acreage.

2003: Only 61,695 acres were mapped baywide in 2003. It is estimated that an additional 1,832 acres may have been present (for an estimated baywide total of 63,527), however, they could not be mapped since some portions of the Bay were not flown due to adverse weather in the spring and summer and Hurricane Isabel in the fall. These regions, including Tavern and Swan creeks; lower Chester River; upper Wicomico River; Prentice, Dividing, and Ball Creeks; Dameron Marsh; and Great Wicomico River were not fully mapped in 2003. The estimated additional acreage is based on acreages mapped in those regions in 2002. Zone and density totals do NOT include estimated additional acreage.

2001: Only 77,889 acres were mapped baywide in 2001. It is estimated that an additional 7,525 acres may have been present (for an estimated baywide total of 85,415), however, they could not be surveyed due to flight restrictions following September 11. The estimated additional acreage is based on acreages mapped in those regions in 2000. Zone and density totals do NOT include estimated additional acreage.

1999: Only 64,718 acres were mapped baywide in 1999. It is estimated that an additional 3,382 acres may have been present (for an estimated baywide total of 69,000), however, they could not be mapped due to the following: either flown too late in 1999, due to poor atmospheric conditions and severe storm events, or not flown until after an early seasonal die-back in freshwater SAV species, possibly a result of increased salinity during the drought and severe storm events. Those areas include Spesutie Narrows, the Bush, Gunpowder, upper Patuxent, lower Magothy, upper York and upper James rivers, and the Swan Point and Tavern Creek area. The estimated additional

acreage is based on acreages mapped in those regions in 1998. Zone and density totals do NOT include estimated additional acreage.

1986: Only 47,414 acres were mapped baywide in 1986. It is estimated that an additional 276 acres may have been present (for an estimated baywide total of 47,690), however, they could not be mapped due to flight restrictions around Aberdeen Proving Grounds. Where available, the previous and subsequent year's data were averaged to generate estimated additional acreage. Please refer to "SAV Area Estimates for Missing 1984 and 1986 Quadrangles Technical Note 12/15/97" for details. Zone and density totals do NOT include estimated additional acreage.

1984: Only 38,228 acres were mapped baywide in 1984. It is estimated that an additional 731 acres may have been present (for an estimated baywide total of 38,958), however, they could not be mapped due to flight restrictions around Patuxent Naval Air, camera malfunction and missing digital files. Where available, the previous and subsequent year's data were averaged to generate estimated additional acreage. Please refer to "SAV Area Estimates for Missing 1984 and 1986 Quadrangles Technical Note 12/15/97" for details. Zone and density totals do NOT include estimated additional acreage.