

SEA GRANT
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How does the Mobile Bay estuary rate when compared to other estuaries in the National Estuary Program? The quick answer is better than most.

A recent study rated the 28 estuaries in the national program using four measures: water quality, sediment quality, benthic organisms, and fish tissue contaminants. Each of the four measures was rated on a scale of one to five with less than two being poor and greater than four being good. Scores in between were shades of fair.

Overall, the Mobile Bay estuary received a 3.0 (fair) compared to a 2.75 for other Gulf estuaries. No Gulf estuary was higher, two were tied with Mobile Bay and four were lower.

For the four measures in the ratings, Mobile Bay was considered fair in water quality, fair in sediment quality, poor in the index of benthic organisms, and good for the fish tissue contaminant index.

The overall condition of the 28 estuaries nationwide was fair (2.7). The Northeast coast rating came in at 1.5 (poor) while the Southeast coast rated 4.0 (good). The West coast scored a 2.5 (fair) and the Gulf coast a 2.75 (fair).

Not surprisingly, the ratings were generally related to human population density around an estuary. The higher the density, the lower the ratings with some exceptions.

Like any rating system, there are some short comings in the data. About one third of the national estuaries did not have complete data for all four measurements. The data used was only from 1997 to 2003. While a reasonable number of samples were taken in each estuary (20 to 30), they were only taken in summer, during the daytime, and only once for that year. Estuaries are very dynamic and conditions change by the hour, the day, the week and the season. Nevertheless, this snap shot provides some information on how Mobile Bay compares to other estuaries. For the complete report go to:
<http://www.epa.gov/owow/oceans/nepccr/index.html>.