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MEDIA RELEASE

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Volunteers to Plant 8,000 Bundles Eelgrass in Morro Bay

From August 9 to August 14, 2014, Morro Bay National Estuary Program, partners, and 100+ volunteers will plant 8,000 bundles of eelgrass in strategic places across the bay floor of Morro Bay. Volunteer divers will gather donor eelgrass material from multiple healthy beds located between Coleman Park and Morro Bay State Park Marina. On shore at Morro Bay State Park Marina, volunteers will sort the grass into smaller bundles, which will then be transplanted by volunteer SCUBA divers.

Community members with diverse backgrounds and skills will come together for this annual habitat restoration project. Scientists, teachers, families, gardeners, divers, and students will roll up their sleeves in the name of keeping the Morro Bay estuary clean and healthy.

The Estuary Program and partners have been assessing the eelgrass condition and extent in Morro Bay for many years. Through monitoring efforts, eelgrass acreage in Morro Bay has been observed to be declining dramatically in the past seven years. In 2007, there were an estimated 344 acres. Today, approximately 15 acres remain. "A number of water quality and environmental stressors are likely contributors to the decline," said Adrienne Harris, Executive Director of the Estuary Program. "While the exact cause of the decline is still not completely understood, it is important to not lose all eelgrass in the bay. By conducting strategic planting around the bay, we hope to give Mother Nature a helping hand."

The Estuary Program conducts monthly assessments of eelgrass bed condition as well as annual fixed transect monitoring and periodic aerial imaging to provide a broad picture of the changes in the bay. "As such, the detection of the decline in eelgrass by the Estuary Program is a testament to the success of the approach," said Scott Kimura, Tenera Environmental.

The dramatic decline in eelgrass sparked a need for intensive restoration to be coupled with regular monitoring. Eelgrass restoration planting in Morro Bay is currently in its third year. Since 2012, eelgrass restoration efforts in Morro Bay have shown success. In some cases, areas where eelgrass has been transplanted have already shown signs of expansion. The long-term goal of the recovery program is to facilitate eelgrass growth in suitable areas. By 2018, the Estuary Program hopes to successfully restore up to 40 acres of eelgrass in Morro Bay as a result of active monitoring and planting efforts, depending on available funding.

To support the effort, many local partners and community members will provide funding and donate in-kind services to help the project. Partners supporting this project include Morro Bay National Estuary Program, Merkel & Associates, Inc., The Black Brant Group, NOAA, US Fish & Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish & Wildlife, City of Morro Bay, Morro Bay Oyster Company, and Depth Perceptions. Local organizations who will volunteer include Guerilla Garden Club, Rotary Club of Los Osos, Morro Bay In Bloom, Eco Rotary of Morro Bay, Morro Coast Audubon Society, SWCA Environmental Consultants, Terra Verde Environmental Consulting, Tenera Environmental Consulting, Morro Bay Garden Club, Grid Alternatives, Delphinus School of Natural History, and many individuals.



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A vital component of our local ecosystem, eelgrass beds are considered one of the most productive ecosystems on the planet. They create valuable habitat for sea life (including fish species we like to eat), provide food for water fowl, and help keep water clean in the Morro Bay estuary. Clean water in Morro Bay is an essential part of our local tourism, recreation, and commercial fishing industries. There have been noticeable differences in water clarity and wildlife population in Morro Bay since the decline in eelgrass. For instance, a report "Brant Counts for Morro Bay, 2012-2013 Season" produced by John Roser, member of Morro Coast Audubon Society, indicates that the local Black Brant goose population counts are nearly half of what they were in 2011. Eelgrass is an important food source for Black Brant geese.

To learn more about the Morro Bay Eelgrass Recovery Program or to donate to this important habitat restoration project, visit www.mbnep.org.

Morro Bay National Estuary Program is a non-regulatory, non-profit organization that brings together citizens, local government, non-profits, agencies, and landowners to protect and restore the Morro Bay Estuary for people and wildlife. The Estuary Program conducts monitoring and research, restores natural habitats, and provides education to residents and visitors for how to keep Morro Bay clean and healthy.

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