

# Salton Sea Fisheries Long-term Monitoring

## Draft Quarterly Report: Fall 2005

Salton Sea Program  
Department of Fish and Game  
78078 Country Club Dr., Ste. 109  
Bermuda Dunes, CA 92203

### **Introduction:**

The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) is monitoring the status and trends of the Salton Sea fisheries. This will require a compilation of sampling results over several years. In the spring of 2003, Department personnel started quarterly sampling at fourteen stations around the sea, as the basis of a long term monitoring program. To allow comparison of current and future monitoring efforts by CDFG to past results, the following protocol was adapted from those previously used by researchers at the Salton Sea.

Each quarter, if conditions allow, this protocol will produce about 816 net-hours of sampling. After each quarter's sampling is completed this draft report will be prepared, summarizing the numbers and species of fish netted, and calculating the overall and species-based catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE). This report will also offer qualitative comments on the condition and breeding status of each species. After annual repetitions of seasonal sampling, enough data will be collected to allow statistical tests for significant differences in numbers, seasonality, and site use, by and among the four species of fish.

### **Methods:**

The sampling sites comprise three broad habitat types: pelagic (3 sites), near-shore (8 sites), and estuarine (3 sites). The pelagic sites are in the approximate middles of the north basin, south basin and inter-basin areas of the Sea. The near-shore sites are spaced widely apart, four each, near the west and east shores, to capture as much breadth of habitat as possible. The estuarine sites are in the body of the Sea, close enough to the mouths of the New, Alamo, and Whitewater Rivers, to be under the influence of their outflows. See Table 1. for the exact locations of all sites.

Sampling takes place during each of the putative seasons, as follows: spring- April and May; summer- July and August; fall- October and November; winter- January and February. We will attempt to compress the total sampling period into as few days as possible, to the extent that the weather, equipment maintenance, and personnel scheduling constraints allow. Nets are typically set at one or two sites in the morning, and hauled in after approximately 24 hours. The exact number of hours set is recorded for each net, to the nearest quarter-hour.

Fish are sampled by deploying multi-panel monofilament gill nets with 6 X 30 foot panels of 0.5, 1, 2, 3, and 4 inch mesh. Two nets are set at all sites at the water's surface. The nets are set far enough apart to allow room for maneuvering a boat during setting and retrieval, usually 100-200 meters. The nets at near-shore and estuarine sites are set in 2.5 to 4.5 meters of water, typically 200-300 meters from the shore.

Two additional nets are set at the bottom of water column at the three pelagic sites. The conditions fish experience at the bottom in deep water is different enough from the surface water,

in dissolved oxygen, light, food availability and temperature, that this can be considered a discrete habitat, and thus we sample it as though it were a separate site.

At the time of each set and retrieval, water depth, water temperature, conductivity, salinity, and dissolved oxygen are measured and recorded.

When nets are pulled in the following day, all fish are removed and immediately stored on ice. Data are collected from these fish as soon as possible, almost always the same day they are hauled in.

All fish are identified to species level and counted. For the four sport fish in the Salton Sea, (tilapia, Gulf croaker, orangemouth corvina and sargo) weights, lengths (fork length), sex, physical condition, and reproductive status are recorded. Fish above five pounds are weighed to the nearest ounce. Fish below five pounds are weighed to the nearest half ounce. Lengths of fish under 50 centimeters are recorded to the nearest millimeter. Lengths of fish over 50 centimeters are recorded to the nearest centimeter. The sex of all adult fish is determined by dissection. A sample of at least ten fish of each species is also dissected to determine physical condition and breeding status.

### **Changes to Protocol after Year One:**

Our protocol is designed to elucidate long-term trends in the fisheries. Until very recently, deep water habitats have provided some low level of productivity for the fisheries, and were important habitat components to sample. Since we began sampling, however, our three deep water sites have been completely unproductive, a costly element of our efforts, and the least probable site for fish use, given the severe reduction in population size which we have discovered.

We have therefore temporarily eliminated sampling at the three deep water sites, which reduces our efforts by 288 net-hours, to a quarterly total effort of 528 net-hours. We leave these sites in the protocol, since they will likely provide useful information about population trends and habitat use, should the fisheries rebound to levels which allow robust comparisons among these and the other sampling sites.

All future comparisons of CPUE that we make will be among quarterly data sets that exclude previously sampled deep-water sites from the calculations. The CPUE values for our first year will then be higher overall, but the comparison between years will be valid. Our data are not designed to determine absolute numbers, but to show trends.

### **Results:**

Our Fall 2005 sampling session was conducted from October 11 through November 8. Table 2. shows the numbers of fishes sampled at each site. Total number of fish sampled at 11 sites were 1,509 tilapia with 532 net-hours of effort, for a CPUE of 2.84. All sites produced fish this quarter, with the exception of the New River estuary.

Tilapia were in three approximate size classes, as discussed below. For all fish, no sex, stomach contents, or condition data were collected.

### **Discussion:**

We are in our third year of monitoring the Salton Sea fisheries. Chart 1. shows a comparison of all results for tilapia, by season. Note that the scale is logarithmic, for ease of viewing. Although denoted as years 2003 and 2004, the Winter seasons' sampling actually took place in January and February of the following calendar years.

The CPUE from this season's sampling represents a 167% increase compared to last year's Fall sampling period. We previously predicted a relatively robust tilapia fishery in 2005. Our expectation of an expanding tilapia population continues to be born out by our sampling results this year.

The sizes of individual tilapia were consistent with our observations of repeated successful reproduction and recruitment, and the development of age structure in the population. The following table presents the range of sizes and their relative percentages, in the last seven quarters' sampling results.

Sample Period	Size Class 1.			Size Class 2.			Size Class 3.		
	Range (mm)	n	%	Range (mm)	n	%	Range (mm)	n	%
<b>Spring '04</b>	67-70	4	22	134-173	14	78	----	0	---
<b>Summer '04</b>	60-70	785	31	120-160	1,751	69	180-200	8	<1
<b>Fall '04</b>	64-79	11	2	120-197	615	98	265-290	4	<1
<b>Winter '05</b>	----	0	---	125-197	34	100	----	0	---
<b>Spring '05</b>	----	0	---	132-194	45	100	----	0	---
<b>Summer '05</b>	60-73	1,152	32	123-175	2,443	68	228-308	10	<1
<b>Fall '05</b>	63-74	13	<1	122-202	1,494	99	240-282	2	<<1

We present a total CPUE which averages results from all sites during a season. This season's CPUE is congruent with both the seasonal pattern and the overall population growth we have previously detected (Chart 1).

Hidden by the process of averaging, however, are a couple of interesting examples of variability in fish distribution. Our two highest net hauls have come from the Test Base site, 1,176 and 1,096 fish during the summers of 2005 and 2004, respectively. Yet only a single fish was caught this season from that site. Likewise, there have been two results from the Whitewater River, 107 and 332 fish during this season and summer 2004, respectively, which appear exceptional against the background of the nine other sampling periods, wherein we have consistently netted only two fish or less at this site. Observations such as these highlight variability in tilapia distribution that thus far defies our understanding.

No Gulf croaker, orangemouth corvina, or sargo were sampled this period. These three marine sport fish species have been undetectable by gill netting since mid-May, 2003. This represents 5,451 nets hours of effort. In addition, none have been detected in fish kills, or presented by anglers during the last 15 months.

**Table 1. Locations of Sampling Sites**

<b>SITE NAME</b>	<b>HABITAT TYPE</b>	<b>UTM COORDINATES</b>
Whitewater River	Estuarine	11S 0587948
		3707343
New River	Estuarine	11S 0621567
		3666958
Alamo River	Estuarine	11S 0628480
		3675635
North Shore	Near-shore	11S 0598465
		3709237
North Wister	Near-shore	11S 0628368
		3685497
Bat Caves	Near-shore	11S 0607427
		3699864
South Salton City	Near-shore	11S 0604971
		3682198
North Desert Shores	Near-shore	11S 0589366
		3699424
The Dome	Near-shore	11S 0596997
		3690022
The Cliffs	Near-shore	11S 0615062
		3691509
Test Base	Near-shore	11S 0608813
		3672196
North Basin	Pelagic	11S 0596156
		3701218
Inter-basin	Pelagic	11S 0606837
		3689452
South Basin	Pelagic	11S 0618275
		3678697

**Table 2.**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>Net-hours</b>	<b>Tilapia</b>	<b>Croaker</b>	<b>Corvina</b>	<b>Sargo</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total Fish</b>	<b>CPUE</b>
10/12/2005	South Salton City	47	182	0	0	0	0	182	3.87
10/13/2005	The Dome	55	258	0	0	0	0	258	4.73
10/14/2005	North Desert Shores	49	237	0	0	0	0	237	4.89
10/19/2005	Whitewater River	49	107	0	0	0	0	107	2.21
10/21/2005	North Shore	48	535	0	0	0	0	535	11.15
10/27/2005	The Cliffs	50	14	0	0	0	0	14	0.28
10/27/2005	North Wister	47	24	0	0	0	0	24	0.52
11/2/2005	New River	46	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00
11/2/2005	Alamo River	49	39	0	0	0	0	39	0.80
11/4/2005	Bat Caves	47	112	0	0	0	0	112	2.38
11/8/2005	Test Base	48	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.02
<b>Totals</b>		<b>532</b>	<b>1509</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1509</b>	<b>2.84</b>

Chart 1.

