Morro Bay Estuary Bacteria and Dissolved Oxygen Analysis
Water Year 2022

Date Range: Water Year 2022 (October 1, 2021 to September 30, 2022)
Analytes: Dissolved Oxygen, *Enterococcus spp*.

Background

The Morro Bay National Estuary Program's Monitoring Program conducts monitoring in the Morro Bay estuary and watershed to track ambient water quality trends and to assess the impacts of specific implementation projects.

Monitoring data is collected by Estuary Program staff and volunteers, under the guidance of a Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) which is reviewed and approved annually by the EPA and the State Water Resources Control Board. This quality control document contains the monitoring locations, protocols, equipment specifications, and other details that allow users to assess the quality of the collected data. The full QAPP is available upon request.

Bay Bacteria

The Estuary Program's goal for bay bacteria monitoring is to assess the safety of the bay shoreline waters for recreational contact. Since 2005, program volunteers have sampled monthly at eight bay shoreline sites and analyzed the samples for the indicator bacteria enterococcus. The samples are collected using sterile technique. Historically, the samples were analyzed by volunteers at the Morro Bay-Cayucos Wastewater Treatment Plant lab and the San Luis Obispo County Public Health Laboratory using the IDEXX method. In 2022, the Estuary Program formed a partnership with Cuesta College in which student volunteers collect and analyze samples via the IDEXX method in a biology lab on campus.

Enterococcus Monitoring Specifications:

Specification	Value
Method	IDEXX Enterolert
Detection Range	10 to 24,190 MPN/100 mL
Hold Time	24 hours
Sample storage conditions	4°C in the dark

For this analysis, a random value between 0.1 and 10 was assigned for all samples that had a result of <10 MPN/100 mL, which is the detection limit for this method. This approach affects the calculated geomeans for past years and thus, graphs will not match previous reports. This method of handling non-

detect data is utilized by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (CCRWQCB) in their own analysis.

Monitoring Locations

The eight bay shoreline monitoring sites were selected because they represent the areas with the most frequent recreational contact. The sites are (from north to south) Coleman Beach (site code COL), Tidelands Park (TID), Windy Cove (WIN), State Park Marina (SPM), Pasadena Point (PAS), Baywood Pier (BAY), Cuesta Inlet (CIN), and Sharks Inlet (SIN).

The following map (Figure 1) indicates the monitoring locations.

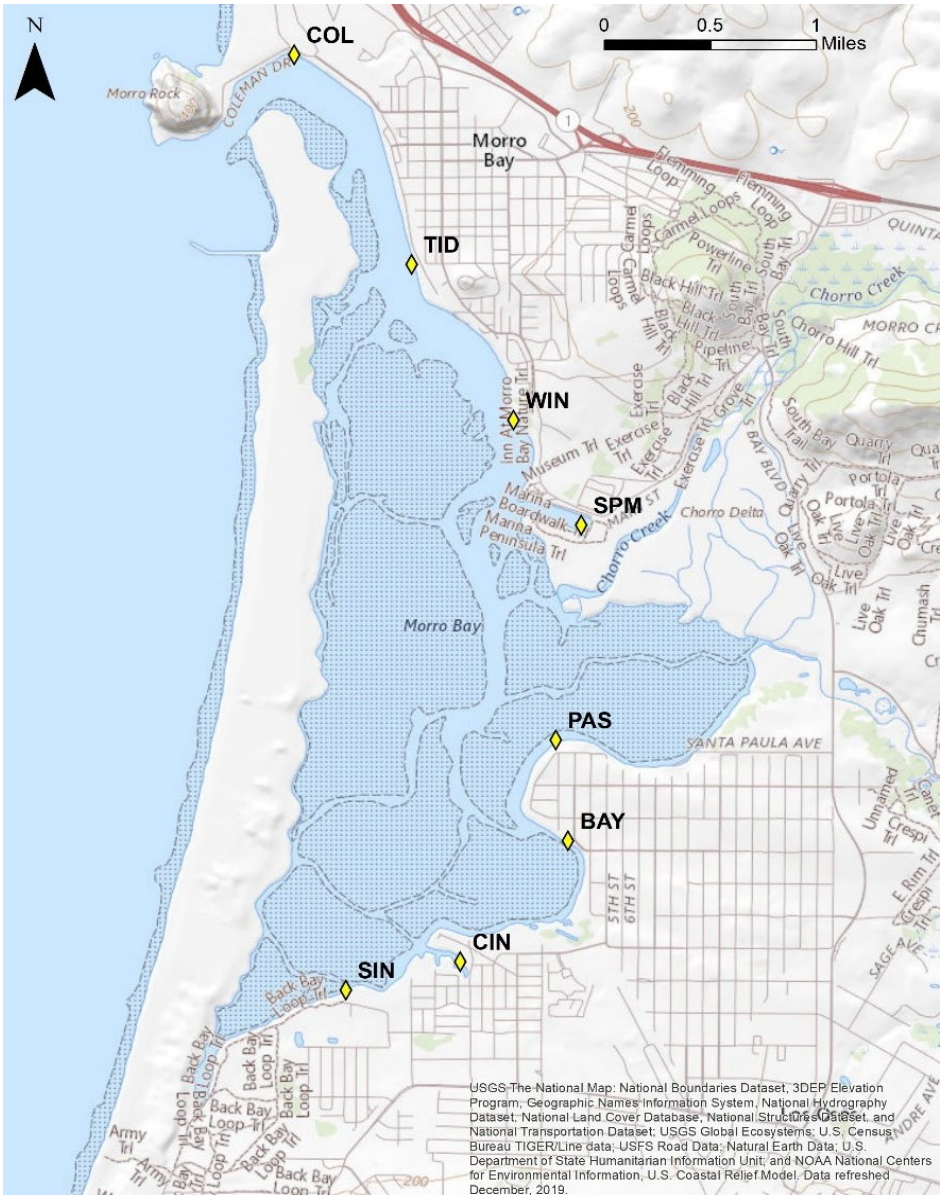

Figure 1. Locations of shoreline bacteria monitoring sites in the Morro Bay estuary.

Results

Indicator bacteria data shows how often the waters in specific locations along the bay shoreline have levels greater than those safe for recreational contact.

The following graph (Figure 2) shows the percentage of samples from Water Year 2022 (WY2022) that exceeded the Statistical Threshold Value (STV) criteria. Ideally, no more than 10% of samples exceed this value of 110 MPN/100 mL for enterococcus. This guiding value is from the State Water Resources Control Board's Bacterial Objectives and is lower than the previous EPA criteria of 130 MPN/100 mL.

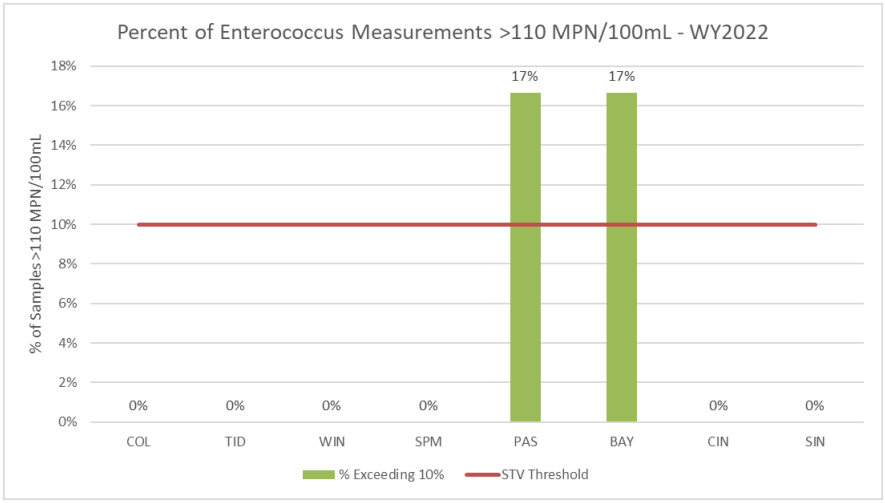

Figure 2. Percent of Enterococcus measurements greater than 110 MPN/100 mL for WY2022. The red line indicates the percentage of samples exceeding this threshold. Ideally no more than 10% of samples exceed this threshold.

The following graph (Figure 3) shows the geomean of all WY2022 data for each site. Ideally, the sample geomean remains below the regulatory threshold of 30 MPN/100 mL. This criterion is from the State Water Resources Control Board's Bacterial Objectives. This is lower than the previous criterion of 35 MPN/100 mL.

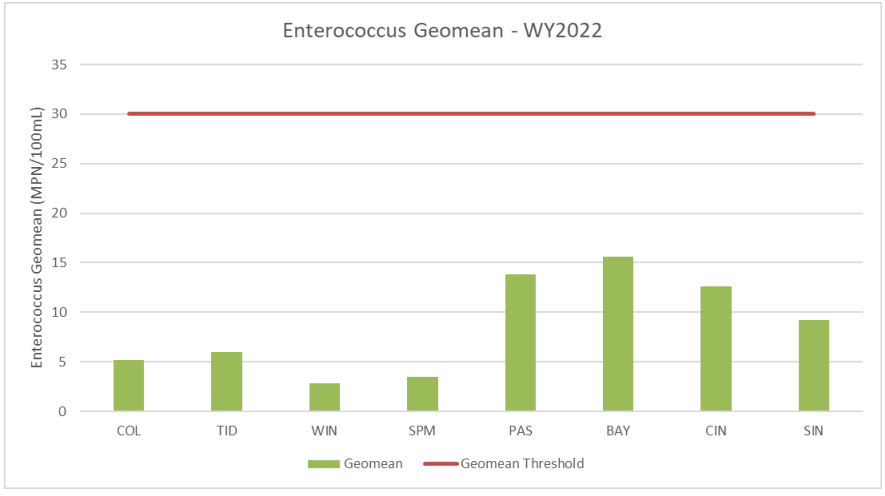

Figure 3. Geomean values from WY2022 collected from Morro Bay estuary shorelines sites. The red line indicates the geomean threshold, using the threshold of 30 MPN/100 mL.

Discussion

Of the eight sites monitored, historical trends have shown six sites only rarely exceed recreational contact standards. The four sites toward the mouth of the bay (COL, TID, WIN, and SPM) have historically had very few elevated bacteria results. These sites are along the well-mixed main channel and are thought to be primarily influenced by ocean water entering the bay with the incoming tide. While the two sites furthest back in the bay, Cuesta Inlet (CIN) and Sharks Inlet (SIN), may experience some water circulation issues due to the shallow depth and minimal mixing with the incoming tides during certain times of year, they rarely exceed the recreational standards. This may be due at least in part to lower levels of bacterial input from sources such as urban storm runoff and wildlife presence.

Two sites, Baywood Pier (BAY) and Pasadena Point (PAS), have had frequent exceedances of recreational standards over 18 years of monthly monitoring. During WY2022, PAS and BAY had two exceedances each. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate historic exceedances of regulatory thresholds from WY2008 to WY2022.

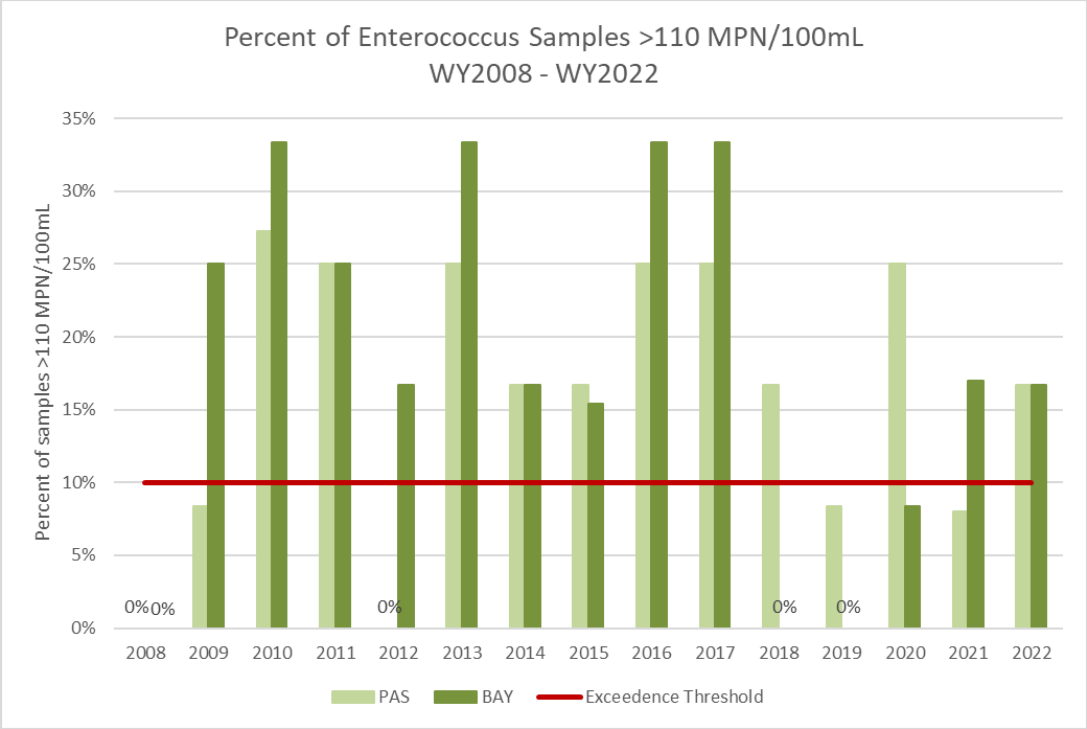

Figure 4. Percent of Enterococcus samples greater than the Statistical Threshold Value (STV) of 110MPN/100 mL over the last 15 years. Note – the absence of a bar indicates that 0% of samples exceeded the threshold for the year. The red line indicates the STV, or Exceedance Threshold. Ideally no more than 10% of samples exceed the threshold.

Figure 4 shows the exceedances of the recreational standard for the last fifteen years. BAY had eleven years and PAS had ten years where more than 10% of samples were at levels unsafe for swimming, although these did not always occur during the same year. In certain years, such as during WY2008, PAS and BAY did not exceed the regulatory threshold. This is represented in the graph with the absence of a line, or 0% noted.

The following graph (Figure 5) shows the geomean of bacteria results by water year from WY2008 to WY2022. For PAS, four of fifteen years exceeded the criteria of 30 MPN/100 mL. For BAY, seven of

fifteen years exceeded the criteria of 30 MPN/100 mL. In the last five years, neither site exceeded the geomean criteria.

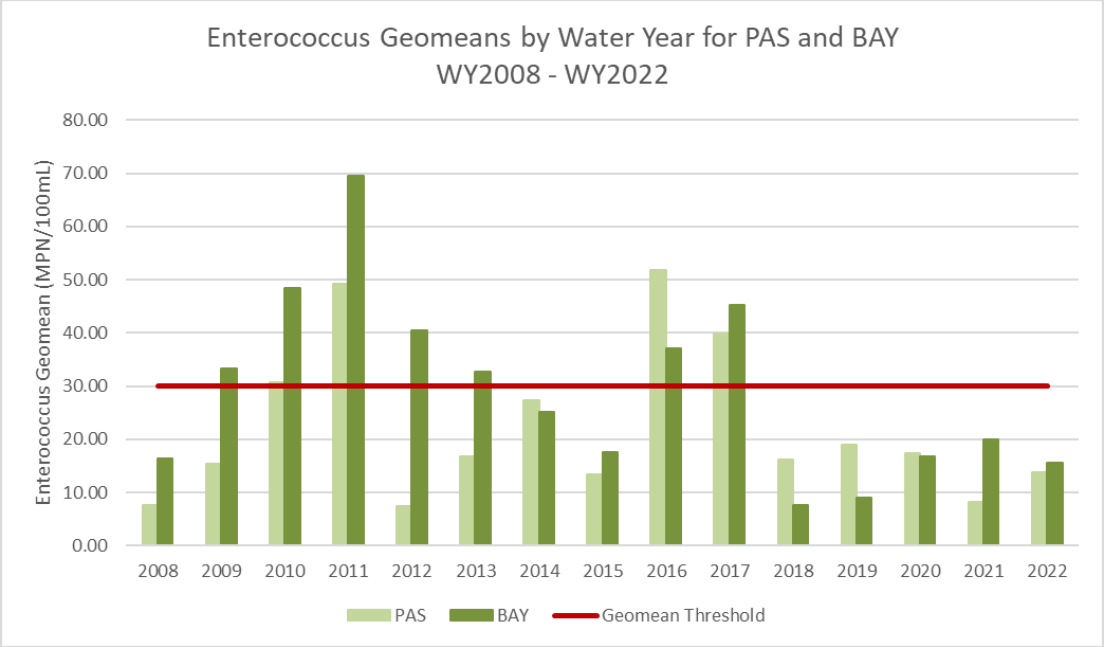

Figure 5. Enterococcus geomean by year for PAS and BAY. The red line indicates the geomean threshold of 30 MPN/100 mL. Ideally, geomean values remain below this threshold.

Pathogens are often flushed downstream into the bay by rainfall events, influencing the seasonality of enterococcus exceedances. Research into the flushing time of the Morro Bay estuary has quantified the amount of time it takes for estuarine water to exchange and mix with oceanic water, which can play a role in the amount of time bacteria introduced by runoff is retained within the bay. Flushing time along the Front Bay sites (COL, TID, WIN, SPM) is typically less than five days, while the Back Bay sites (BAY, PAS, CIN, SIN) experience flushing times of up to two weeks at certain times of year during neap tide cycles (Taherkhani et al. 2023).

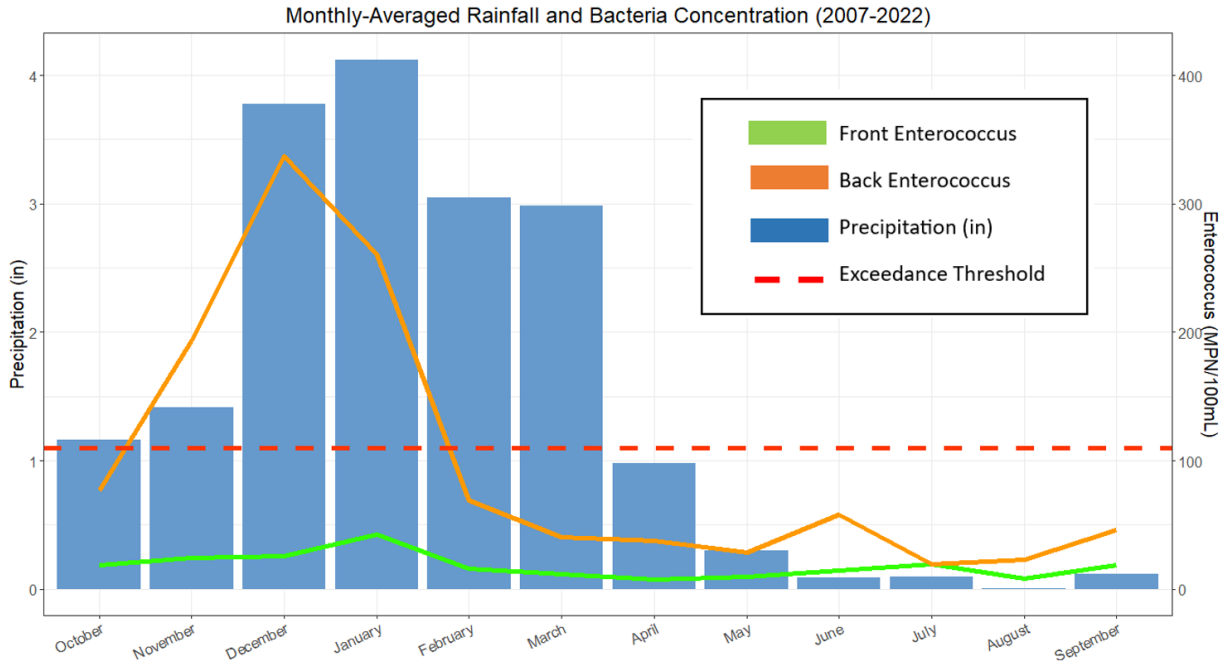

Figure 6. Precipitation (in) and Enterococcus concentration from 2007 to 2022 averaged by month. Rainfall is depicted by the blue bars, Front Bay bacteria is indicated by the green line, and Back Bay bacteria is indicated by the orange line. The red dashed line indicates the 110 MPN/100 mL STV threshold. Total precipitation values were taken from CIMIS station 52, located in San Luis Obispo.

The figure above indicates how bacteria concentrations are correlated with rainfall, and how the Back Bay sites experience higher peaks in bacteria concentration during the wetter months. Linear regressions comparing the monthly-averaged datasets found both the Front Bay (p=0.039) and the Back Bay (p=0.008) to be significantly correlated with total precipitation. The regulatory threshold exceedances at BAY and PAS addressed in the previous figures typically occur during the onset of the rainy season (November – January). The number of exceedances at the other two Back Bay sites, CIN and SIN, are low compared to BAY and PAS, however the average magnitude of their exceedances are much higher than the Front Bay sites (Table 1). The longer flushing times in the Back Bay likely play a role in these higher exceedances.

Site Name	Region	Number of Exceedances (2007-2022)	Mean Enterococcus Concentration during Exceedances (MPN/100mL)
COL	Front Bay	6	217
TID	Front Bay	2	278
WIN	Front Bay	10	301
SPM	Front Bay	5	170
BAY	Back Bay	37	619
PAS	Back Bay	32	887
CIN	Back Bay	10	559
SIN	Back Bay	7	1047

Table 1. The number of 110 MPN/100 mL exceedances from 2007 to 2022 by site and the mean bacteria concentration during these exceedances.

Potential sources of bay bacteria could include runoff from land, contaminated groundwater, and wildlife. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) monitors bacteria levels in the freshwater seeps, which are areas where shallow groundwater is pushing up to the surface and draining into the bay. The data indicates elevated levels of the fecal coliform indicator bacteria.

Bay Dissolved Oxygen

Since 2002, Estuary Program volunteers have collected surface measurements for dissolved oxygen (DO) concentration, temperature, and salinity at seven sites in the bay on a monthly basis. The monitoring occurs within two hours of sunrise to capture the lowest DO levels of the diurnal cycle. Monitoring the lowest DO levels of the day allows the Estuary Program to assess the extent to which various regions of the bay support aquatic species that require adequate oxygen levels to thrive.

Equipment Specification

The Estuary Program uses a YSI Pro 2030 meter, which measures DO concentration (mg/L), DO % saturation, temperature, specific conductance (µS/cm), and salinity (ppt).

The equipment specifications for DO are as follows:

Specification	Value
Sensor Type	Polarographic
Measurement Range	0 to 50 mg/L
Calibrated Range	0 to 20 mg/L; 0 to 35°C
Accuracy	±2% of reading for 0 to 20 mg/L; ±6% of reading for 20 to 50 mg/L
Resolution	0.01 mg/L

To ensure data quality, the Estuary Program calibrates the meters weekly for DO using an internal calibration and tests against a Winkler titration twice a month. For specific conductance and salinity, the meters are calibrated using known standards on a weekly basis.

Monitoring Locations

Seven bay monitoring sites were selected to represent different regions of the bay. The sites are (from north to south) Tidelands (site code ATP), State Park Marina (SPO), Los Osos Channel (LO2), Pasadena Point (PSP), Cuesta Channel (CHI), Cuesta Inlet (CSI), and Sharks Inlet (SHI).

The following map (Figure 7) shows the seven monitoring locations. Sites are grouped into two sets: Front Bay and Back Bay. Sites within each group are sampled on the same day, but the two groups are generally not sampled on the same day.

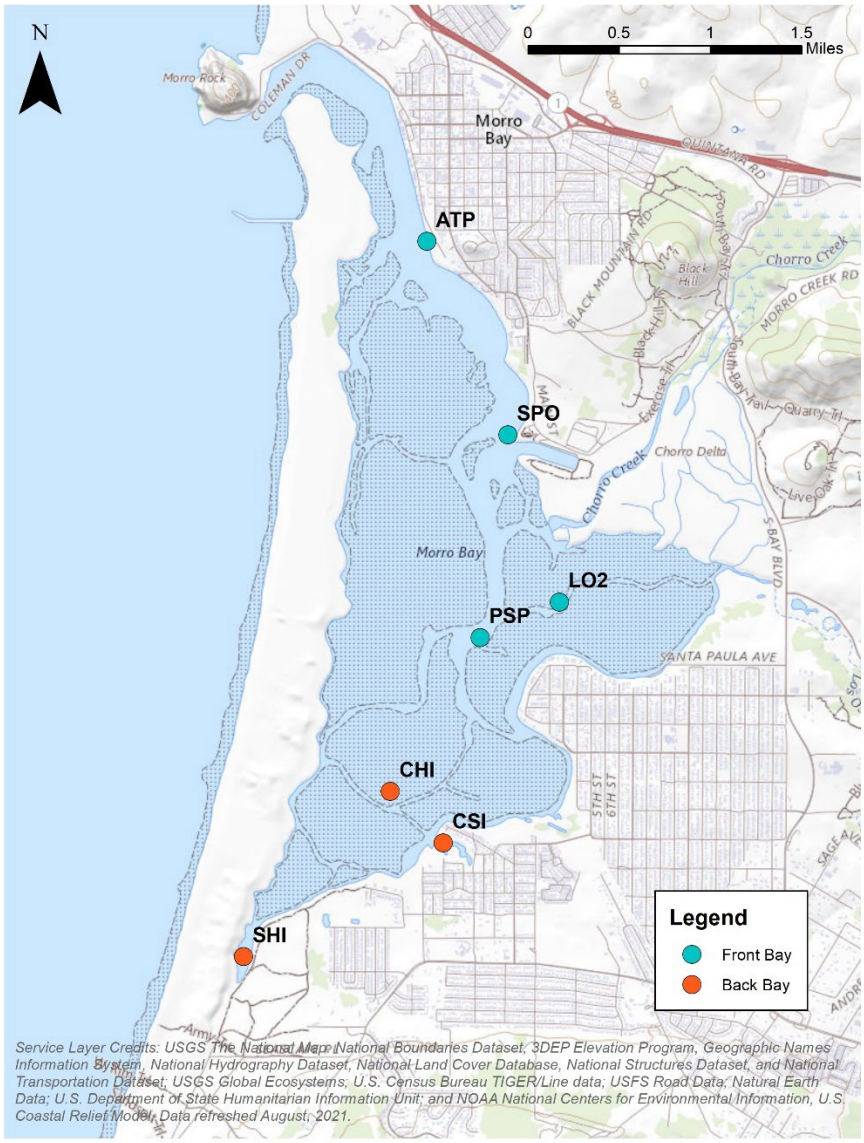

Figure 7. Map of bay dissolved oxygen monitoring locations.

Results

Analysis compares measured DO levels to standards protective of aquatic life. The CCRWQCB has designated the Morro Bay estuary as Marine Habitat (code MAR) and lists an objective that DO concentrations must not fall below 7 mg/L to be protective of aquatic life.

Data collected in the Front Bay during October of 2021 and June of 2022 were excluded due to equipment errors that resulted in inaccurate readings. Thus, a full year of readings are not available for those four sites for WY2022.

The following graphs show the DO concentration data for WY2022 at each of the seven sites. Figure 8 shows the distribution of measurements for each site over WY2022 using a box-and-whisker plot.

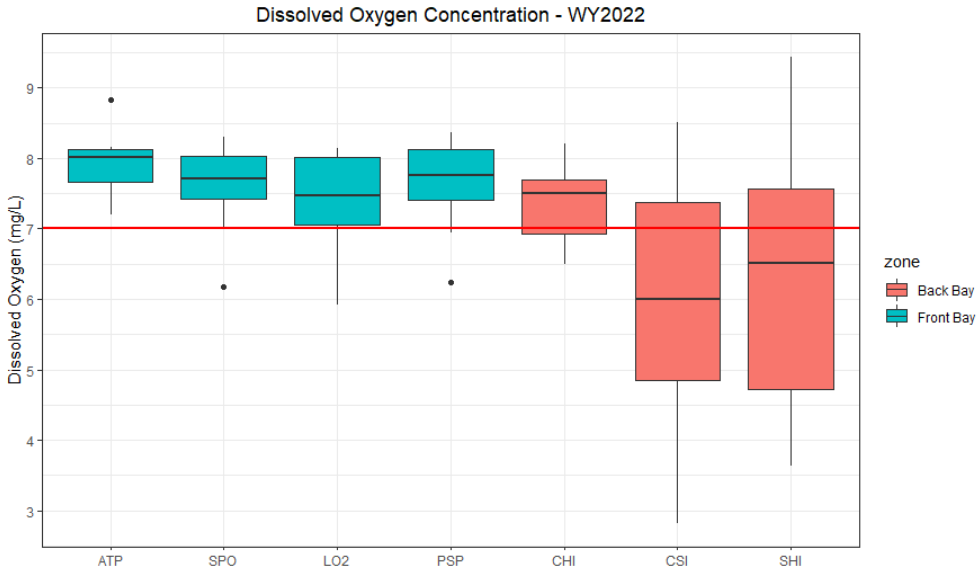

Figure 8. Dissolved oxygen concentration distribution at seven representative sites during WY2022. The horizontal red line depicts the 7 mg/L protective limit. Ideally DO concentrations remain above 7 mg/L at all times. Two months of Front Bay data were excluded due to inaccurate sensor readings.

The second graph (Figure 9) shows the percentage of DO concentration readings in WY2022 that were less than 7 mg/L, meaning that the recorded DO measurements failed the numeric objective set by the CCRWQCB for marine waters. Ideally, no more than 10% of results would fall below the standard.

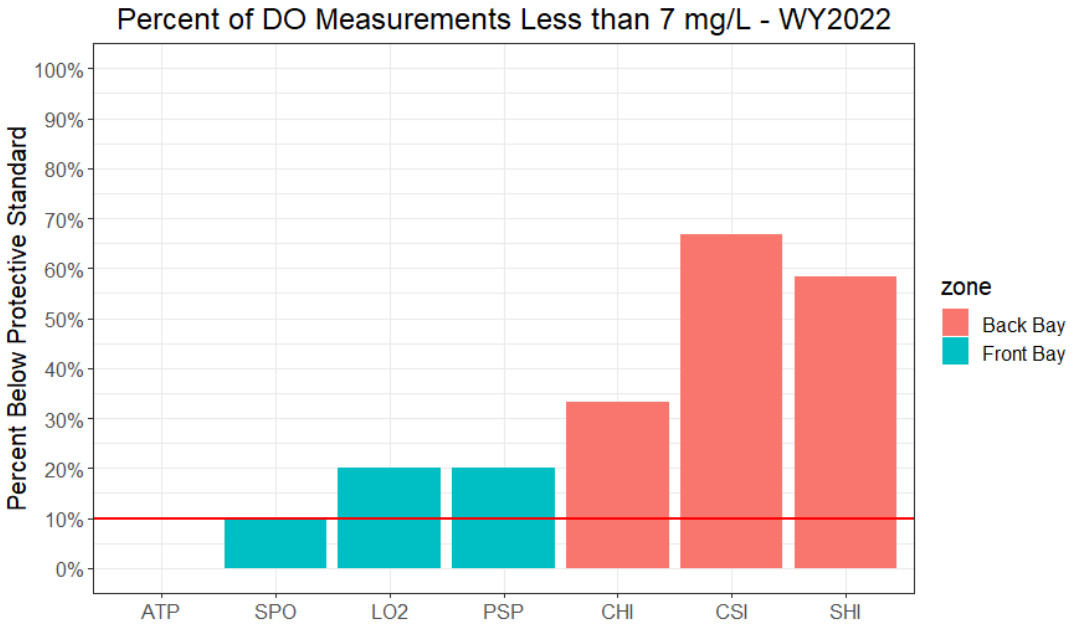

Figure 9. Percent of DO measurements less than 7 mg/L during WY2022. Only ATP and SPO had no more than 10% of samples fall below the protective standard. The horizontal red line depicts the 10% limit. Two months of Front Bay data were excluded due to inaccurate sensor readings.

Figure 10 shows the average DO values for WY2022 data. Ideally, all readings are greater than 7 mg/L to ensure adequate oxygen to be protective of aquatic life and to comply with CCRWQCB standards.

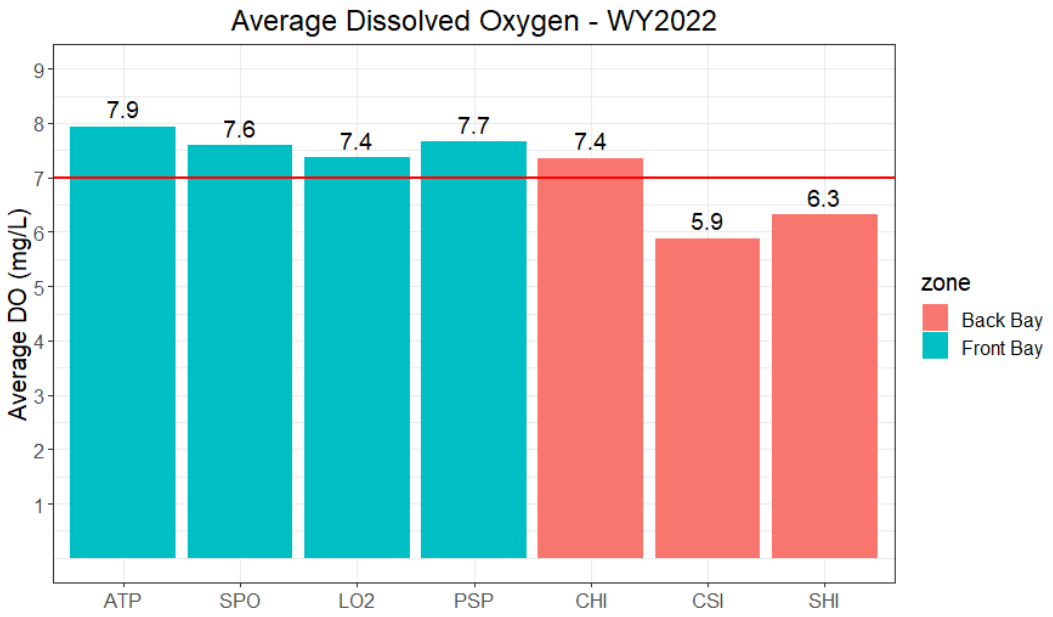

Figure 10. Average of dissolved oxygen levels measured during WY2022. The horizontal red line depicts the 7 mg/L protective limit. Ideally, DO concentrations stay above that limit at all times. Two months of Front Bay data were excluded due to inaccurate sensor readings.

For the following figure, all Front Bay sites were combined (ATP, SPO, LO2, PSP) and all Back Bay sites were combined (CHI, CSI, SHI) to show how dissolved oxygen levels varied throughout WY2022 in the Back versus the Front Bay. The Front Bay remained above the level of concern from November to May. It then fell below the threshold for the summer months before reaching healthy levels again in September. The Back Bay was below the threshold in October, was above the threshold from November to March, and fell back below for the remainder of the water year (Figure 11).

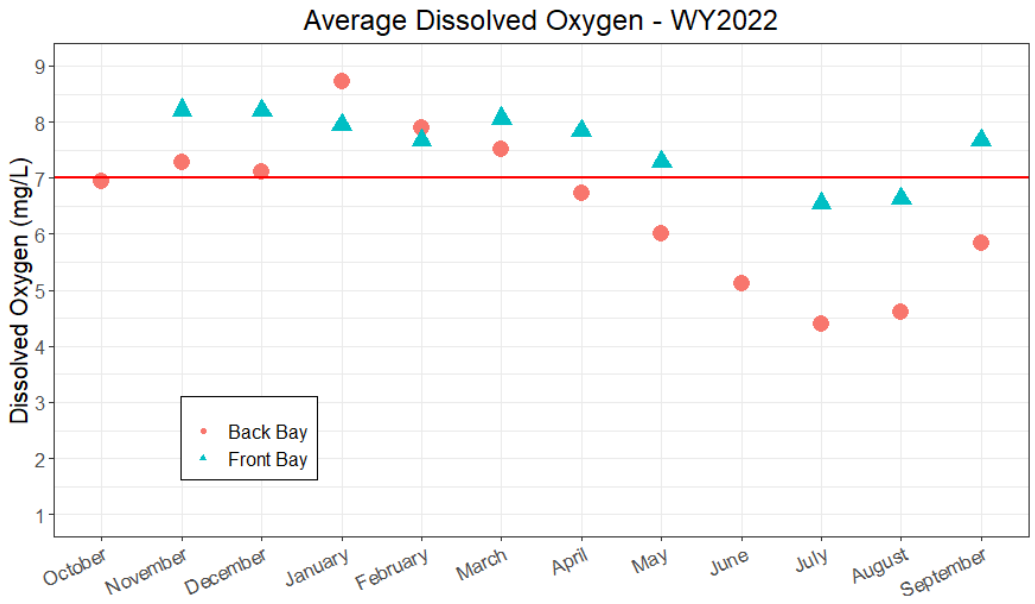

Figure 11. Average dissolved oxygen levels among Front and Back Bay sites for each month during WY2022. The horizontal red line depicts the 7 mg/L protective limit, and ideally DO concentrations stay above that limit at all times.

In Figure 11, dissolved oxygen in the Front Bay and Back Bay appears to follow a trend throughout the water year, which can also be seen in the five-year averages for Front and Back Bay sites. Dissolved oxygen stays above the protective limit during cooler months and drops below the limit during warmer months, with the Back Bay sites experiencing the largest decrease in concentration. Five-year averages for the Front and Back Bay sites can be seen in more detail in Figure 12.

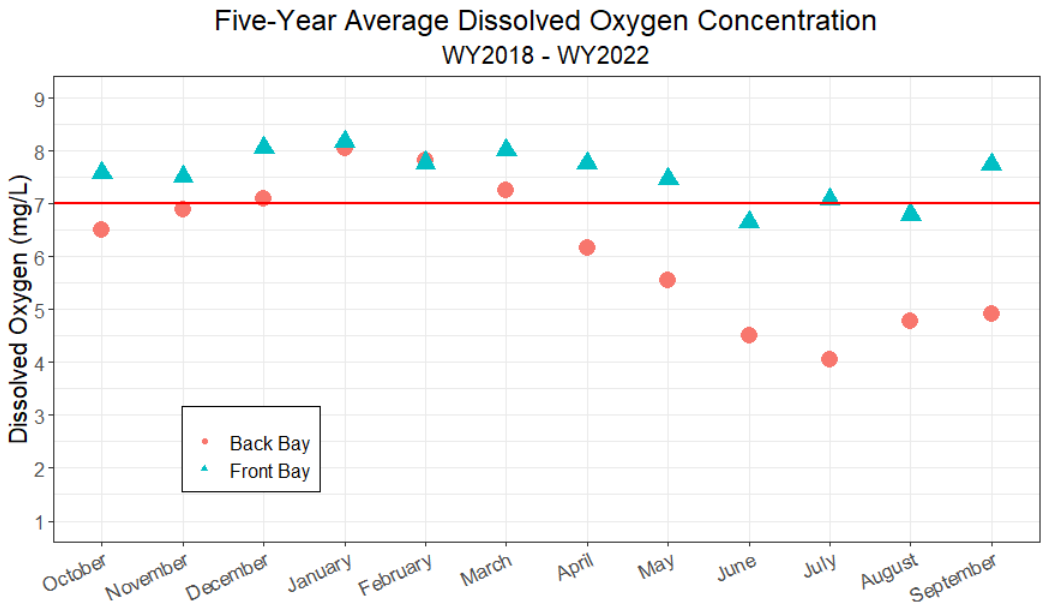

Figure 12. Five-year monthly averages of Front and Back Bay dissolved oxygen concentrations from WY2018 to WY2022. Averages are shown here on a monthly basis to show seasonal trends, with the 7 mg/L level of concern in red. Ideally DO concentrations stay above that limit at all times.

Discussion

The estuary waters frequently have DO levels below the 7 mg/L water quality objective protective of the beneficial uses of the estuary, as outlined by the Water Quality Control Plan for the Central Coastal Basin. These trends also apply to data prior to WY2022. Sites located closer to well-mixed channels (ATP, SPO, LO2, and PSP) had fewer readings that fell below 7 mg/L, although all sites except ATP and SPO violated the Basin Plan standard during WY2022 in more than 10% of the readings.

The depressed DO levels may be due in part to bay circulation. Waters in the back bay are shallower, meaning they heat up faster in the sun. Warmer water cannot hold as much DO as cooler water. These shallow waters evaporate, leading to water that is more saline than the front bay at certain times of year. Salty water cannot hold as much oxygen as fresh water. Sites toward the back of the bay seem to have lower DO concentrations on average than those located in the channel and towards the front of the bay. Moreover, nutrient availability likely plays a fundamental role in the observed DO levels of aquatic environments. When excess nutrients enter the bay, the overall biomass of photosynthetic organisms like algae can increase. While this may lead to elevated peak DO levels, the microbial organisms that eventually break down this plant material absorb oxygen and cause very low minimum DO values. In addition to nutrients, many other factors such as temperature, light availability, and tidal current also contribute to the distribution of algae in the bay and its effect on localized DO concentrations.

Data Availability

The data is available from the California Environmental Data Exchange Network (CEDEN), a State Water Resources Control Board data portal. To retrieve data,

- Visit www.CEDEN.org.
- Click on Find Data.
- For Program, choose Morro Bay National Estuary Program.
- Bay Bacteria: For Stations, choose Morro Bay sites Coleman Beach shoreline, Tidelands Park shoreline, Windy Cove, State Park Marina shoreline, Pasadena Point shoreline, Baywood Pier shoreline, Cuesta Inlet shoreline, and Sharks Inlet shoreline.
- Bay DO: For Stations, choose Tidelands Park, State Park Marina bay, Sharks Inlet bay, Pasadena Point Bay, Near Cuesta Inlet, North of Cuesta Inlet Mouth, and Los Osos Creek Channel.
- Click on Retrieve Data.

For additional details, contact the Estuary Program at 805-772-3834 or staff@mbnep.org

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