

Quarterly Report for Matagorda Bay Mitigation Trust September 30, 2023

Project:

Trophic linkages and habitat connectivity of popular sportfish in the Matagorda Bay system

Organizations:

¹Center for Sportfish Science and Conservation (CSSC) at Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi

²Texas State University (TSU), Department of Biology

Investigators:

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Jessica Dutton, Ph.D.² (Co-PI)

Contract No.: 022

Project Term: 03/01/2022 – 02/28/2025

Reporting Period: 06/1/2023 – 08/31/2023 (6)

The contracted project with the Matagorda Bay Mitigation Trust was initiated as of March 1, 2022. The overall goal of this study is to evaluate the movement patterns, trace element concentrations (i.e., potential contaminants), and trophic linkages between three recreationally exploited sportfish species (black drum, red drum, and spotted seatrout) and their prey items in Matagorda Bay to determine whether movements throughout the bay system identified via acoustic tracking exposes these sportfish to varying concentrations of trace elements.

NOTE: As a result of the Objective 1 findings by PI Banks and Co-PI Streich, the proposed plan to answer Objective 2 and 3 has changed. Since tracking data suggests that red drum and black drum are more residential in the Point Comfort mercury Superfund site (Closed Area) whereas spotted seatrout only remain there for a short period of time, Co-PI Dutton is now expanding the food web study within the Closed Area to better understand how all three sportfish species are exposed to trace elements by including more prey items. In addition, apex predators and other common species found in the Closed Area have been included in the study. Other sites within Matagorda Bay (Palacios, Port O'Connor, Matagorda) will still be investigated, but with the focus only being on spotted seatrout and their prey items, since that is the only sportfish that appear to be moving to other parts of the bay system.

This change to the study will provide a better understanding of how trace elements are trophically transferred within the Closed Area food web. In addition, this study will provide trace element concentration data for a variety of species within the Closed Area. It is important to collect this baseline data now because if the proposed dredging goes ahead, then there will be an extensive dataset of trace element concentrations for a variety of species prior to dredging which can be compared to post dredging data.

Task 1 - Sample acquisition and TEXAAN maintenance: acoustic tagging of fish, sample acquisition for stable isotope/trace element analyses, receiver array [TEXAAN] installation, expansion, maintenance, and download.

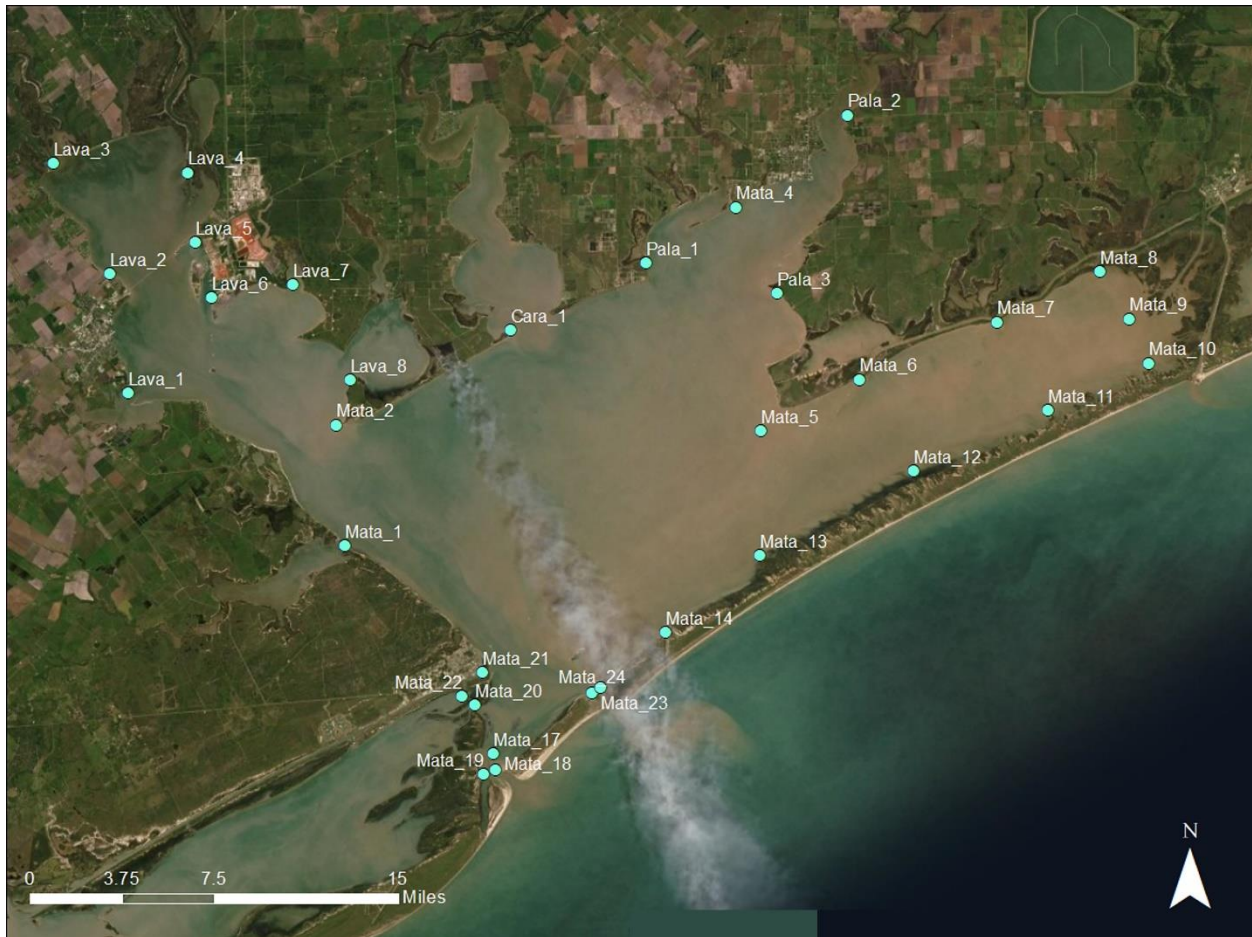
Status: Ongoing

Spring '22

- CSSC purchased acoustic receivers, tags, and batteries to expand the TEXAAN and tag selected fish species as appropriate.
- CSSC received tags and receivers and has begun preparations for deployment of the acoustic transmitters. Tagging and equipment deployment will be initiated in the next quarter.
- CSSC purchased various lab supplies and fishing tackle as preparation for upcoming field operations.
- A field laptop was purchased with contributed funds from this project. This laptop will allow for efficient downloads and troubleshooting of acoustic equipment in the field.

Summer '22

- CSSC deployed 13 receivers to expand the TEXAAN. Eight were deployed in Lavaca Bay, 3 were deployed near Palacios, and 2 near Pass Cavallo.
- Two receivers previously deployed in Port Lavaca were downloaded and redeployed.
- CSSC acoustically tagged 10 red drum and 1 trout.
- TSU has started sampling sportfish in the closed/impacted area and have obtained 2 red drum, 1 trout, and ~10 black drum for toxicological analyses.
- TSU has collected oysters, mullet, and blue crabs representing prey items for toxicological analyses.



Fall '22

- CSSC acoustically tagged 5 red drum, 1 black drum and 5 trout.
- CSSC downloaded and replaced 29 receivers in the TEXAAN.
- TSU has completed sampling for the below listed sportfish in the closed/impacted area: red drum and black drum.
- TSU has completed sampling for oysters and mullet representing prey items for toxicological analyses.

Winter '22

- Nothing to sample for this quarter as field sampling will begin again next quarter.

Spring '23

- CSSC helped TSU sample prey items, including completing sample needs for several species.
- TSU has completed samples for red drum and black drum. Still need a few trout to complete the target sample number.
- CSSC downloaded and replaced 5 receivers in the TEXAAN.

Summer '23

- CSSC completed acoustic tagging in the closed area (14 black drum, 9 trout).
- CSSC began tagging fish in other areas of the bay (5 redfish, 5 trout, 1 black drum).

Task 2 – Laboratory analyses: stable isotope and trace element analyses.

Status: Ongoing

Spring '22

- Nothing to report for this quarter as field sampling will begin in the next quarter.

Summer '22

- Nothing to report for this quarter as field sampling is on-going.

Fall '22

- Nothing to report for this quarter as field sampling is on-going. Trace element and stable isotope analyses will begin next quarter on species that targeted sampling quota has been met.

Winter '22

- Nothing to report for this quarter as field sampling is on-going.

Spring '23

- Nothing to report for this quarter as field sampling is on-going.

Summer '23

- All samples have been collected, dissected, and freeze-dried. The species included are:
 - Closed Area: sportfish (red drum, black drum, spotted seatrout), prey items (eastern oyster, hooked mussel, grass shrimp, white shrimp, blue crab, fiddler crab, mud crab, Atlantic croaker, striped mullet, pinfish, Gulf menhaden, perch, longnose killifish), other teleosts (hardhead catfish, gafftopsail catfish, southern flounder, gizzard shad, skipjack), elasmobranchs (bull shark, blacktip shark, scalloped hammerhead, southern stingray, cownose ray), and marsh grass.
 - Sediment from three locations has also been collected to determine environmental trace element concentrations.
 - Palacios, Port O'Connor, Matagorda: spotted seatrout, white shrimp, Atlantic croaker, striped mullet
- Trace element analysis: Mercury (Hg) analysis is ongoing and data for several species has been collected for the Closed Area. All Hg data has been collected for Palacios, Port O'Connor, and Matagorda.

Task 3 – Data processing and administrative tasks: data processing and administrative tasks such as writing reports, invoicing, outreach materials, and disseminating results.

Status: Ongoing

Spring '22

- CSSC conducted project management, internal project team meetings, and task coordination.

Summer '22

- CSSC conducted project management, internal project team meetings, and task coordination.
- TSU recruited Miranda Sams, an M.S. student who will complete the project for her thesis.

Fall '22

- CSSC conducted project management, internal project team meetings, and task coordination.

Winter '22

- CSSC conducted project management, internal project team meetings, and task coordination.

Spring '23

- CSSC conducted project management, internal project team meetings, and task coordination.

Summer '23

- CSSC conducted project management, internal project team meetings, and task coordination.