

Eye on eelgrass

(The following is excerpted by permission from a story by Ken Kelley that appeared in the September issue of Rural Delivery. The problem is one that we should all be aware of and keep an eye out for.)

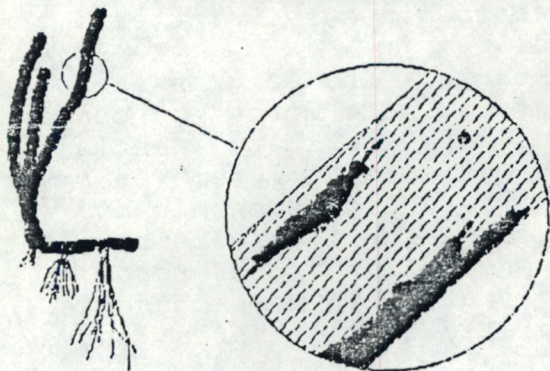


WANTED

INFORMATION ABOUT THE

EELGRASS

DECLINE



If You Find Evidence of Infected Eelgrass

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The disappearance of eelgrass beds, first noticed in New Hampshire in 1983, has now spread to parts of Massachusetts and Maine. The current dieoff is showing alarming similarities to the blight which devastated eelgrass beds along the North Atlantic coast in the 1930's. That so-called "wasting" disease first appeared in high salinity areas of the U.S. in 1931, and within three years wiped out 90 percent of the eelgrass from the Carolinas to the Canadian Maritimes, as well as Europe.

The small patches of eelgrass which survived were found in brackish or low-salinity waters. While the cause of the dieoff was generally blamed on a slime mold infection which attacked the plants, other researchers attributed the disease and decline to abnormally high water temperatures in the North Atlantic in the early '30s.

The current outbreak was first detected in high salinity areas of New Hampshire's Great Bay by Dr. Frederick Short of the University of New Hampshire (UNH). Since then Dr. Short has confirmed an eelgrass decline as far south as Boston Harbour, and north to Casco Bay in Maine. In response to a flyer distributed for infor-

mation on sightings of eelgrass declines, Dr. Short has received reports from people from Long Island to Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia.

Eelgrass, Zostera marina, is a seagrass or flowering plant found in shallow coastal waters from the Carolinas to Newfoundland. It performs a number of vital functions in the marine food chain, especially acting as a nursery for juvenile life forms of marine animals. The 1930s dieoff resulted in a drastic loss of fish, waterfowl and shellfish along the East Coast.

Gradually through the 1940s and '50s eelgrass slowly began recolonising the North Atlantic coast. Most areas have had a complete recovery of eelgrass, but in some places there has been a disappearance of eelgrass due to