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## **DPI&F on the hop over seagrass**

COMPREHENSIVE seagrass surveys have been completed as part of a program to monitor the state of this vital fish habitat area between Hinchinbrook Island and Cape Bowling Green.

The Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (DPI&F) “hopped” from site to site in a helicopter at low tide using GPS to map the status of seagrass.

DPI&F fisheries biologist Helen Taylor said a detailed baseline survey around southern Hinchinbrook Island and the Herbert River mouth was conducted during the low tide last week.

“This is an important catchment area with major fisheries habitats,” Ms Taylor said.

“The seagrass meadows in this area support a large dugong population.”

“It is important to collect information on these seagrass habitats as they face threats from a range of sources including climate change, pollution and coastal development.”

The survey covered Halifax Bay, Cleveland Bay and down to Bowling Green Bay south of Townsville as well.

“Seagrass meadows, covering some 6000 square kilometres along the Queensland coast, are nursery and feeding grounds that sustain our million-dollar fishing industry,” Ms Taylor said.

“The meadows support juvenile prawns and fish, dugong and turtles.

“We have maps of coastal seagrass areas throughout most of Queensland, but we have some gaps we need to fill and this survey covered one such gap.

“The helicopter survey enables a rapid assessment of intertidal seagrasses. At the same time, we were able to land for closer inspections or take samples as required.”

She said Queensland had one third of the world’s species of seagrass and they form an integral habitat in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The DPI&F has an ongoing program which monitors seagrasses. The program is a partnership with the Australian Governments Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility represented in north Queensland by the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre (RRRC) and industry bodies.

Ms Sheriden Morris, the director of research for the RRRC, said the surveys would fill important gaps in the knowledge required to assess the risks to these environments for better management and protection of the key habitats in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

“This is an excellent example of commonwealth and state agencies cooperating with industry to ensure the future health of the Great Barrier Reef environment,” she said.

(Photographs – page 2)

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Surveying seagrass from the air.



A seagrass meadow criss-crossed with dugong feeding trails.



(Left) Senior Scientist Michael Rasheed of Northern Fisheries Centre with the seagrass quadrat used to get an idea of the species and quantity of seagrass. (Right) Terrific views of the Townsville Strand from the helicopter. Those guys at NFC have a great job!