

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR  
U.S.GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

**SUMMARY OF GEOCHEMICAL COASTAL ZONE RESEARCH OF THE SOUTHEASTERN,  
UNITED STATES**

by

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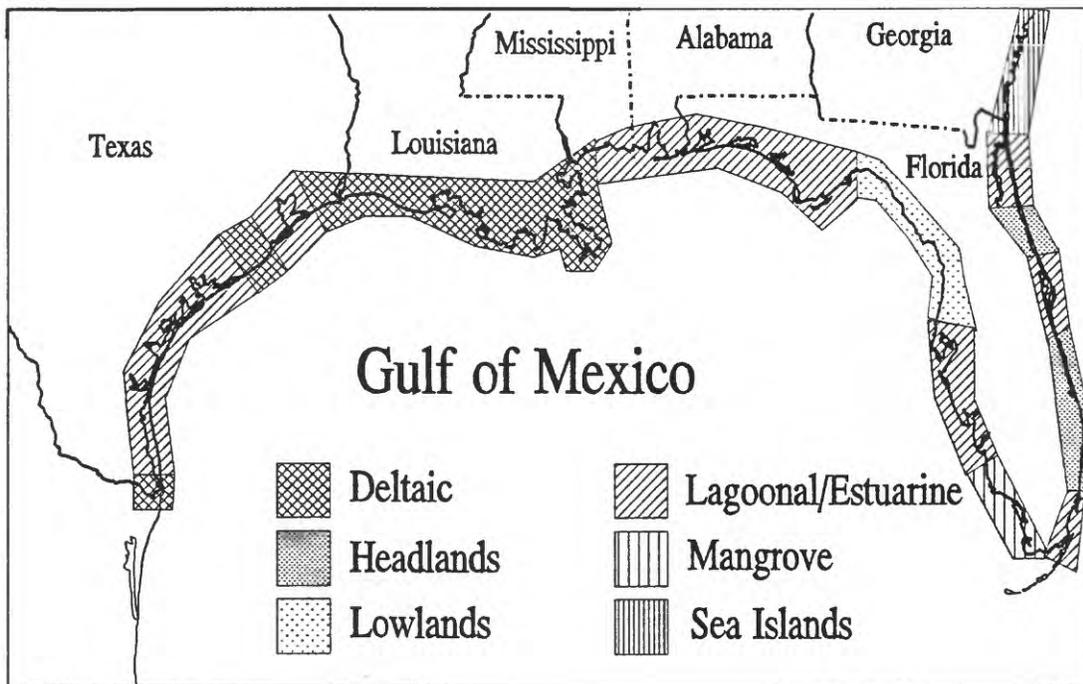
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## INTRODUCTION

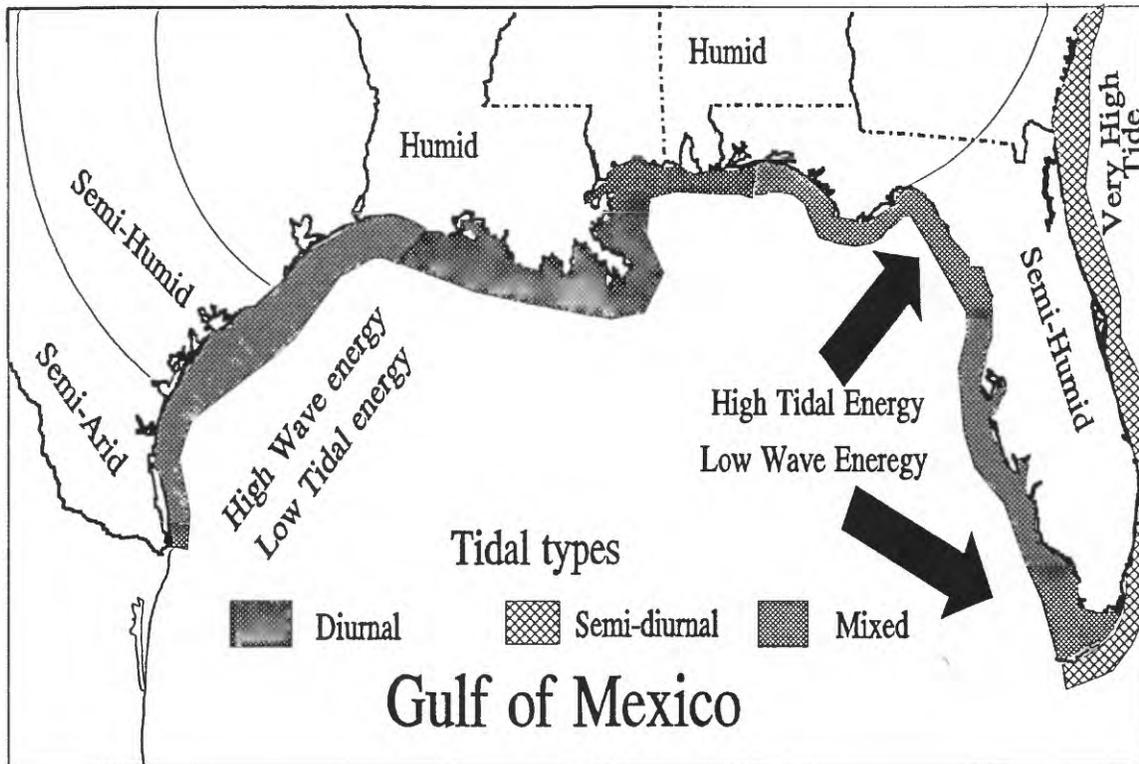
Assessing the enrichment or depletion of chemical elements in coastal regions requires consideration of geologic, mineralogic, hydrologic and biologic processes. These processes are controlled by the climatic, the geologic, and/or the geomorphic setting of the region. The coastal zone of Southeastern United States contains a variety of geomorphic features from the arid tidal flats of South Texas to the tropical mangrove coastline of south Florida (Fig. 1). This region is also effected by a broad spectrum of wind and tidal energy; from the high wind-low tidal regime of the western Gulf to the low wind-high tidal regime of the Georgia sea islands, plus an occasional tropical storm (Fig. 2). The combination of geomorphic form and climatic regime plays a significant role on the geochemistry of any particular region. The rocks that are drained by the rivers entering the coastal zone, also, play

Figure 1 -- Distribution of geomorphic features in the coastal zone of the southeastern United States.



a significant geochemical role; the carbonate-phosphatic rocks of south Florida produce a different chemistry than the siliclastic rocks of south Texas.

Figure 2 -- Coastal climatic zones for the southeastern United States.



This report presents the status and availability of background data, a summary of knowledge on the distribution of chemical constituents, a bibliography of investigations for the coastal regions in the southeastern United States, and the availability of material for continued study. The following is a summary of geochemical knowledge that demonstrates the disparity of information in the southeastern coastal zone.

#### WESTERN GULF OF MEXICO

**Texas coastal zone** -- The geochemistry of the Texas coastal zone has been examined by many investigators beginning with those associated with API Project 51 (Shepard and others, 1960). From the early 1960's, the students and faculty of the University of Texas Marine Laboratory performed coastal zone topical studies. The unpublished results of these studies are on file in the library at Port Aransas, Texas.

Beginning in the early 1970's until the closing of the laboratory in 1985, regional geochemical studies were performed by personnel of the U.S. Geological Survey Facility in Corpus Christi, Texas. The largest coastal project of this office began in 1975 in cooperation with the Bureau of Economic Geologic at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas. This study yielded 6672 samples at a spacing of approximately one mile (1.67 km.). These samples were analyzed for total organic carbon (6377), for major and trace metal concentrations (2104) and for size distribution (2750). The data from this program is reported in a series of publications by the Bureau of Economic Geology, the University of Texas, Austin (Submerged Lands of Texas Series). The results of this investigation with smaller regional studies (Holmes, 1974, Berryhill and Trippet, 1981, Hill, 1979, Sims, 1975, and Elias, 1973 and others) have produced a large amount of geochemical information for the Texas coastal zone.

Presently, there are two major programs underway to monitor environmental degradation; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's (NOAA) Status and Trends/Mussel watch program and Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program (EPMAP). These and continuing works by cooperative investigators at Texas A. and M. University, Galveston and at the University of Texas Marine Laboratory, Port Aransas will provide more information that will be added to the regional data. Other site specific chemical data are in the files of the U.S. Army Corp. of Engineers and the Texas Water Quality Board (U.S. Army Corp. of Engineers in Corpus Christi and Galveston and the Texas Water Quality Board in their headquarters in Austin, Texas).

**Rio Grande and Laguna Madre** -- The southern border of the Texas Coastal zone is the Rio Grande delta. This feature is presently being destroyed, in part due to the cessation of sediment supply and in part high wave and tidal energy. Thus the coastal zone surrounding the mouth of the river and extending north into the Laguna Madre is dominated by sands and sandy-muds. Chemical data from the area indicate higher than background concentrations of chromium and manganese that are attributed to heavy mineral concentrations (White and others, 1986; Holmes, 1969). Within semi-arid Laguna Madre, the climate and physical processes have combined to form a marine sabkha. The sabkha chemistry of this region has been studied by Amdurer (1978), Gudramovics (1981) and Long and others (1985). Amdurer(1978) and Gudramovics (1981) concentrated on major element chemistry and proved

that the area is consistent with sabkha hydrology. Long and others (1985) examined the trace element chemistry of the deposits. They concluded that trace metals appeared to be concentrated by fluids flowing through cyanobacterial layers. This conclusion is consistent with the unpublished data of Holmes, (1970) who found high concentrations of molybdenum in algal mats of the northern tidal flats in Laguna Madre.

The only bay/estuary in the Laguna Madre region is Baffin Bay. Because this bay is cut off from the open marine environment, it lacks normal estuarine circulation. As it lies in a semi-arid zone of the coast, the waters are often hypersaline. The combination of the hypersalinity and high energy leads to the production of oolites, that are found in abundance at the mouth of the bay. Because of the unique character of the bay, it serves as a natural laboratory for the University of Texas Marine Laboratory at Port Aransas and is the focus for many investigations into the organic and inorganic processes.

**Central Bays** -- From Corpus Christi north to the Texas-Louisiana border, a series of lagoons exist inside an almost continuous barrier island. Despite the proximity to Laguna Madre, these lagoons are different as they lie within a more humid climate zone. Most of these bays and lagoons are fed by rivers that produce waters lower in salinity than the open Gulf. Unlike the sandy floor of Laguna Madre, the sediments of the bays are muds with coarser material confined to the rims. Within all the bays there are many oyster reefs that act as minitraps for sediment.

These bays are shallow, averaging about 3 meters. The rates of sedimentation in these bays average about 32cm/100 years, with highest rates near the deltas. The infilling of the bays is, however, inhibited by the climatic dynamics of the region. This section of the Gulf of Mexico has strong shifts in wind energy. These strong wind shifts occur from late September till late April. When a front approaches the coastline, strong southeasterly winds are produced. The turbulence created by this wind suspends much of the sediment. As the front passes the coastline, the wind shift to a northern direction flushing the bays, carrying the suspended material onto the shelf. Because, anthropogenic material is flushed with the suspended material. Concentrations of lead and barium on the south Texas shelf is the result of this process (Holmes and Martin, 1977).

Trace element concentrations in the bays and the offshore areas (table 1) show only a few areas with significant enrichment of metals (White and others, 1989). In Corpus Christi Bay, elevated barium concentrations

are the result of the extensive drilling (Over 500 wells) The zinc is derived from the harbor (Fig. 3) (Holmes, 1974, Holmes and others, 1974, and White and others, 1983). Except the Houston Ship channel, Matagorda/Lavaca Bay complex and Sabine lake, there is no other body of water that has significantly elevated concentration of chemical elements.

The elevated zinc and related elements in Corpus Christi Bay and mercury in Matagorda/Lavaca Bay are the direct result of industrial input; a zinc

smelter in Corpus Christi Harbor and an aluminum refinery on Lavaca Bay. In both cases these facilities are located on channels that acts as a conduit for fresh marine waters. For Corpus Christi, the channel-bay interaction is seasonal. During the summer, the harbor water becomes anoxic and metals such as zinc react with the increased H<sub>2</sub>S, precipitating sulfides. With the onset of winter and the passage of northers oceanographic conditions are changed. A strong flow of bottom water is set up, bringing "fresh" marine waters into the ship channel. This flow is strong enough to cause turbulence, suspending contaminated bottom sediment. As result some precipitated sulfides are dissolved. The metals released complex with chlorine and are transported to the bay via the surface return flow. At the mouth of the harbor, the enriched waters are mixed with turbid bay waters and the metals are adsorbed on suspended sediment and deposited near the mouth of the channel.

In Matagorda/Lavaca bay complex the distribution of mercury is believed to be linked to water flow in the ship channel also. Here, there is no indication of a seasonality. With this exception, the processes of precipitation, stirring by tidal currents, transport as chloride complexes and redeposition on suspended sediment are similar (Holmes, 1977).

The high metal concentrations within the Houston Ship channel and Galveston bays are the direct results of effluent from the area's industrial complex. The cause of the high cobalt in Sabine lake is presently unknown (Fig. 4). This area has been resampled and there is no basic change in metal distribution (White and others, 1987).

Figure 3 -- Zinc/mud ratio in Corpus Christi Bay, Texas. From White and others, 1983.

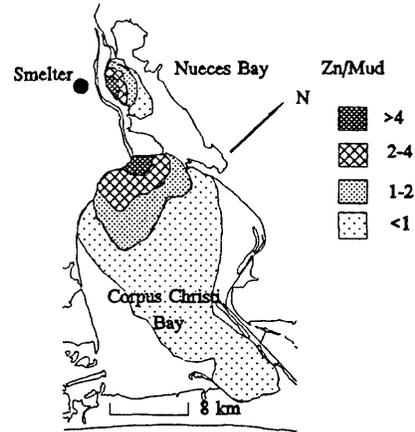
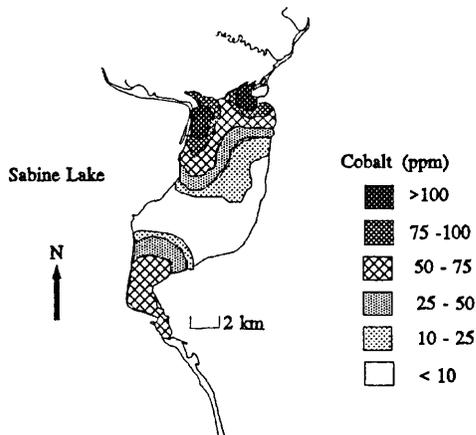


Figure 4 -- Cobalt concentration in bottom sediments of Sabine Lake, Texas.



There has been no concentrated effort to determine the background levels of organic constituents comparable to the trace metal programs. There has been much work on the distribution of selected organic components by the University of Texas Marine Science laboratory and researchers at Texas A. and M. University (mostly deep water). Currently, there are two programs that may supply some insights to the distribution of organic material in the Texas Coastal

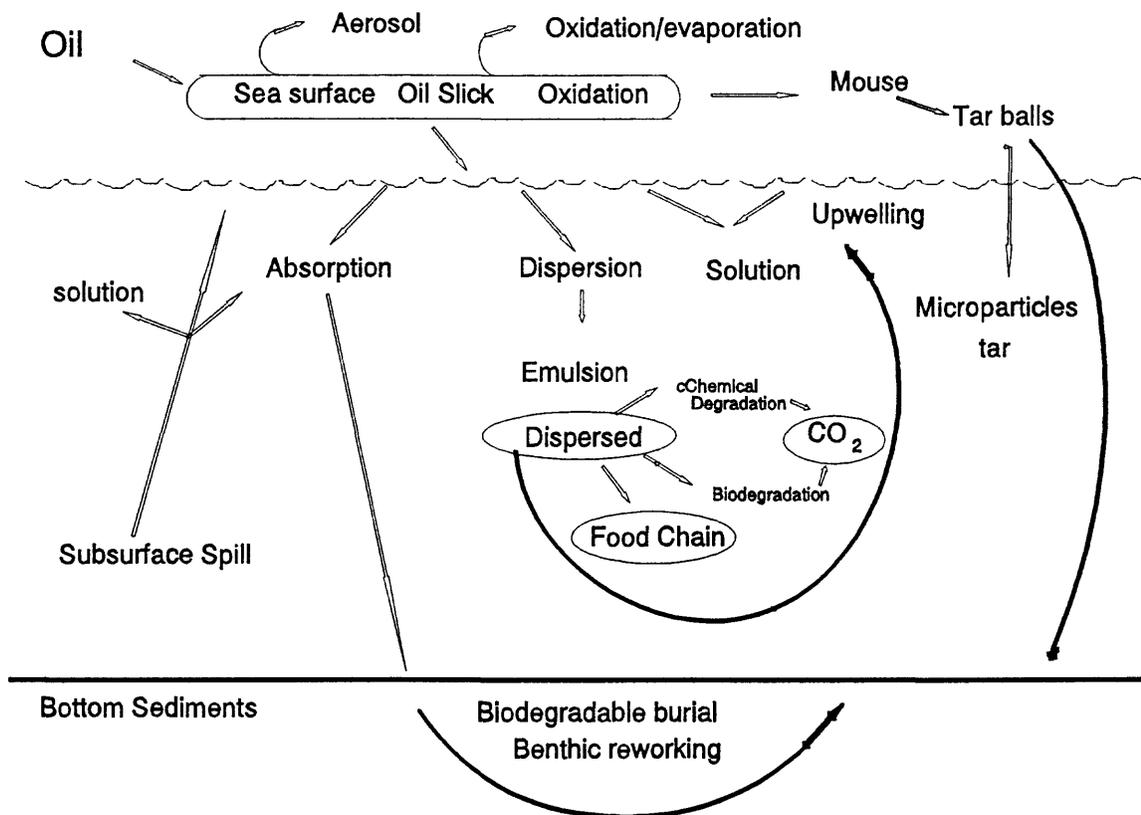
Zone; the National Status and Trends Program (NOAA) and the Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program (EPA). As these programs are in the initial stages and it is hoped that they will provide information of the distribution and processes that affect the distribution of organic materials. Fig 5 diagrammatically presents what is known about the effects of oil spilled into marine systems.

#### NORTHERN GULF OF MEXICO

**Northwestern Coastal Zone --** From Sabine lake to the mouth of the Mississippi River, little information on the distribution of chemical constituents is available. Because of the lack of major industrialization, biological resources (major shrimp grounds lie further offshore and oyster reefs are far from the industrial sites) and urbanization, there is apparently no urgent reason to have chemical information for this area.

This region, an area of low tidal and wind energy (excepting tropical storms) is part of the Mississippi delta plain and is undergoing subsidence and erosion. Currently, there is a major effort underway to understand the geologic framework of this region, but there are no comparable chemical investigations, save the Status and Trends Program and the Environmental Assessment Program (EPA). One study underway in the area is a project sponsored by the Climate Program of the U.S.G.S. This study is focusing on the role of saline encroachment on the production of methane. This study may provide some information on geochemical processes in the region and may provide background information for further studies.

Figure 5 -- Fate of oil in the marine environment. Graph from Preston, 1988.



**Delta of the Mississippi River** -- The Mississippi River is the most significant river entering the Gulf of Mexico. As it drains the industrialized central part of the country, it has the potential to be a major source of pollution of the Gulf Coast Zone and the Gulf of Mexico. The present mouth of the river at the shelf edge, with the major currents sweeping effluent further seaward along the shelf edge, Thus the effect on any contaminant carried by the river on the coastal zone is unknown.

There have been a few investigations on the disposition of contaminants from the river. Available data has been summarized by Trefry (1977) and suggest that the suspended material carries >90% of the heavy metal load of the river. Selective leaching experiment data from the suspended material showed that hydrous oxides and aluminosilicate lattices are the primary phases of the particulate material. During the low flow stages of the river, there was an increase of organic material with an associated decrease in particulate iron and aluminum but an increase in manganese, zinc, copper and cadmium. The increase sedimentation rates and seasonal biological activity

produce a reflux of manganese from the sediment to the overlying waters. This reintroduction of manganese is caused by the interaction of chemical and biological activity: sequestration of elements during the winter when biological activity is slowed and release during the summer when biological activity is increased.

**Northeastern Gulf of Mexico** -- From the mouth of the Mississippi River to the Big Bend region of Florida is a series of lagoons/ bays, the largest of which is Mississippi Sound. There has been a series of studies within this region by the Ocean Springs Laboratory of the University of Southern Mississippi and other Universities of the Mississippi Sea Grant Consortium. The results of these studies have been summarized (table 2) by Isphording and others (1986). Comparison of this data with that from the Texas Gulf Coast is difficult because important information is missing: the distribution of samples and number of samples from each region. Isphording and others (1986) have suggested, based on metal levels, in the Mississippi Sound area that Mobile Bay is highly impacted, Apalachicola bay as moderately impacted, and Perdido and Pensacola Bays are the least affected. This is somewhat of an enigma, since Apalachicola Bay is the least urbanized or industrialized of the bay systems.

#### **EASTERN GULF OF MEXICO**

Geochemical data from the coastal zone of the eastern Gulf of Mexico is very sparse. Except for studies in Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor, the remaining Florida coast is poorly known. Even in Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor, the level of studies and information, at this time, does not approach the quantity of data and information in the coastal zone of the western Gulf.

**Tampa Bay** -- The chemical data from Tampa Bay has been summarized by Doyle and others, (1985, 1989). Data is being collected by the National Status and Trends Program, but this is being collected at suspected contaminated sites throughout the bay. This program and the EMAP (Environmental Monitoring Assessment Program) investigation by the Environmental Protection Agency will provide some information on the health of the bay, but this information will be limited to those areas sampled. In fact only the northern part of the Tampa Bay region is included in the EPA program.

**Charlotte Harbor** -- Chemical data for this region is less than for Tampa Bay. Froehlich and others (1985) studied

the distribution of arsenic, barium, germanium, tin and nutrient biochemistry in the bay. This bay was chosen because in drains the phosphate mining region of south Florida. They found a very productive diatom bloom present at the mouth of the Peace river. This "front" is responsible for the complete removal of the fluvial fluxes of nitrate, silica, and inorganic germanium. The bloom had only a slight effect on the distribution of arsenic. The barium was highest in the region of mid-salinity concentrations that was attributed to releases from phosphate clay slime. Information of other chemical constituents apparently is non-existent.

**Florida-Georgia coastal Zone** -- Extensive data reported to have been compiled by the State of Florida have not yet been published and were unavailable as of this writing. There have been topical studies made in Biscayne Bay region and in the Jacksonville region by the Corp of Engineers. In addition some coastal zone chemical studies have been carried out by members of the Harbor Branch Foundation in the St. John River, by students at Florida Atlantic University, and students at the University of Miami. But the information from these investigations have no yet found its way into the literature. In the Sea-Island region of southeastern Georgia, students and the faculty at the Sidaway Institute have investigated trace metal transport from the fresh to marine systems, but there is very little systematic investigations such as the Western Gulf available.

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## Appendix I

The following bibliography is a compilation of major investigations on the geochemistry of the coastal zone in the southeastern United States.

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Appendix II

The following is a list of samples available for future study. The Texas samples are stores at the Bureau of Economic Geology facilities in Austin Texas; the Florida samples are stored in the core storage facility at Florida Sate University. The samples that have organic carbon data could valuable for studies of trace metals and organic constituents.

Region	Total	Bays	Shelf	Chem.	T.O.C	Text	Yr.
Brownsville, Tex	1193	617	576	457	1185	423	77
Kingsville, Tex	845	277	568	269	798	332	77
Corpus Christi, Tex.	876	498	378	235	852	543	76
Port Lavaca, Tex.	1051	507	463	350	925	463	77
Bay City-Freeport, Tex.	765	139	707	217	696	264	77
Galveston-Houston, Tex.	1368	696	672	395	1364	549	76
Beaumont-Pt. Arthur, Tex.	574	160	414	181	557	176	77
<b>Total Texas</b>	<b>6672</b>	<b>2894</b>	<b>3778</b>	<b>2104</b>	<b>6377</b>	<b>2750</b>	
Mobile Bay, AL	310	300	10	----	310	310	65
Perdido Bay, AL	146	146	----	----	---	146	67
Pensacola	315	315	----	----	---	315	66
Choctuahatchee	235	235	----	----	---	235	63
St. Andrew's Bay	10	10	----	----	10	10	64
St. Joseph's Bay	101	101	----	----	101	101	60
Appalachicola	106	96	10	----	106	106	60
St. George Bay	176	176	----	----	176	176	63
Tampa Bay, FL	773	773	----	----	773	773	61
Charlotte Harbor, FL	215	215	----	----	215	215	63
Gullivan Bay, FL	377	377	----	----	377	377	60
Card Sound, FL	200	200	----	----	---	200	65
<b>Total AL/FL</b>	<b>2964</b>	<b>2944</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>----</b>	<b>2068</b>	<b>2964</b>	<b>---</b>

Marine = samples taken offshore; Chem = number of samples with chemical data; Text = no of samples with textural data; TOC = number of samples with organic carbon data; yr = year collected.