

## Casino boat gouges gulf seagrass

By [Craig Pittman](#), Staff Writer

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State investigators took aerial photos Friday that show the SunCruz casino boat churning through sea grass beds off the Pasco and Hernando county coastline that had previously been torn up by a similar-sized vessel.

The photos show the gambling ship trailing what appears to be a plume of stirred-up mud and sea grass debris, said Keith Kolasa of the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

The state Department of Environmental Protection launched an investigation in December after Kolasa notified the agency that aerial photos showed that a large boat had gouged huge trenches 12 feet wide and up to 3,000 feet long through the beds. Those photos, shot last April, were being used as part of an effort to map the sea grass beds.

Earlier this month, a spokeswoman for the casino ship line told the *St. Petersburg Times* that state officials did not notify the company of any problems. Beth Fifer, a spokeswoman for Port Richey Casino Inc., said on March 14 that another vessel must have damaged the sea grass, not the casino boat.

A Coast Guard investigator, Lt. Matt Dooris, said the agencies working with the DEP on the case have not met to talk about it since January. The DEP's case file shows state officials questioning whether the damage west of Aripeka was done in state or federal waters, a crucial point in determining which agency would take the lead in pursuing the case.

Kolasa said Swiftmud scientists found damage 8 miles offshore and 4 miles offshore. Generally the boundary between state and federal jurisdiction in the Gulf of Mexico is 9 miles offshore.

One top DEP official — Jim Stoutamire, the administrator for the office of submerged lands and environmental resources in Tallahassee — joked in a Dec. 10 e-mail to other state officials that the 465-passenger ship was "apparently doing donuts" while picking up passengers brought out from the mainland on a shuttle. The e-mail's subject line says, "BIG offshore seagrass scars — SunCruz."

A federal scientist who studies sea grass scarring in the Keys said it's not surprising the DEP investigation is moving slowly.

"They've been dragging their feet on this issue for a long time," said Jud Kenworthy, a research biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

A 1995 state study found that more than 170,000 acres of Florida's sea grass beds were scarred by boats, he said, "and that was 13 years ago, and we're still struggling with it."

However, DEP spokeswoman Pam Vazquez said the agency "has worked closely with the various agencies to address the situation that has been brought to our attention. The department remains committed to carrying out its regulatory responsibilities by conducting a full investigation."

A bill currently under consideration by the Legislature would allow patrol officers to charge careless boaters with damaging sea grass beds, with penalties that start at \$50 and progressively increase to \$1,000, said Kent Smith of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

But those penalties would apply only to damage in a state aquatic preserve, Smith said. That would do nothing to protect the sea grass beds that may have been damaged by the casino boat.

"Although we worked hard to have this apply to all sea grass systems in state waters, the boating lobby successfully confined it to aquatic preserves," Smith said.

While they are not part of any aquatic preserve, the sea grass beds that may have been damaged by SunCruz are part of the largest and most pristine stretches of sea grass in the country, biologists say.

"That area has escaped major damage primarily because there hasn't been much development there," said Paul Carlson, a research scientist with the wildlife commission's marine science laboratory in St. Petersburg. He called those sea grass beds, which start just north of Anclote Key at the Pinellas-Pasco county line and wrap around the Big Bend area to just south of Tallahassee, one of the state's crown jewels.

The damaged portions of those beds will likely not recover for at least a decade, especially the parts that were covered in slow-growing turtle grass.

Sea grass beds filter pollution out of the water and form a nursery and feeding ground for a variety of marine species. Tear the sea grass out, Kenworthy said, "and there's a hundred, maybe a thousand, species out there that no longer have access to shelter and habitat they once had."

In 1999, the DEP sued the SunCruz operation in Port Richey, alleging propellers were gouging holes in the Pithlachascotee River's bed as the ship headed to sea. The casino boat now stays several miles offshore and lighter shuttle boats taxi gamblers to and from land. The new damage done to the sea grass beds appears to be occurring in the area where the shuttle boats meet the casino boat.

In 1997, the DEP and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers accused the company of harming the bottom of the Crystal River, but the company continued operating despite cease-and-desist orders. After two of its boat pilots were arrested, SunCruz finally gave up on that site and moved north to the Cross Florida Barge Canal in Inglis, where it then got in trouble for dumping its sewage in the gulf.

*Times staff researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this story.*

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