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*Draft Supplemental  
Environmental Impact Statement*

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Sears Island Dry Cargo Terminal • Searsport, Maine

Distribution of Eelgrass in Penobscot Bay, Maine

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1995

*Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc.*

*May 1995*



# **Distribution of Eelgrass in Penobscot Bay, Maine**

By

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# Distribution of Eelgrass in Penobscot Bay, Maine

## Executive Summary

Eelgrass was surveyed using aerial photography, low elevation surveillance, and ground truthing by boat to define the spatial distribution of eelgrass beds throughout Penobscot Bay. The narrative presented here accompanies a set of 14 maps that depict both confirmed and probable eelgrass beds. The largest stands of eelgrass were found in the Bagaduce River on the eastern side of the Bay, although substantial beds were found in many protected harbors and coves particularly around Sears Island, Cape Jellison, Islesboro and Deer Isle. Smaller eelgrass beds were scattered throughout the Bay. The ecological significance of the eelgrass resource to the Penobscot Bay region is great. Its functions and values include fish and waterfowl habitat, trophic food chain basis, water filtration, lobster nursery, shellfish recruitment substrate, and sediment binding and stabilization.

## Introduction

The distribution of eelgrass, *Zostera marina* L., in Penobscot Bay, Maine, was assessed using aerial photography with field checking by low level aerial surveys and, in some cases, by boat. A series of maps depicting locations of eelgrass beds throughout the Bay in 1994 was produced from these data. Coastal habitat maps of Penobscot Bay and elsewhere in Maine were created in the mid-1970s (Timson 1976) from aerial photographs (1:20,000) to identify areas of eelgrass and other coastal habitats. Although less than 2% of the shoreline was field checked (Tucker 1991), these maps do provide an assessment of eelgrass distribution 20 years ago. As with many resource assessments from years ago, the validity of these eelgrass maps is difficult to determine. Thus, the current project was undertaken in coordination with the Maine Department of Transportation and the Maine Department of Marine Resources in an effort to develop a current eelgrass distribution map that could be easily entered into the Maine Geographic Information System (GIS). The immediate purpose of the eelgrass survey was to provide information regarding eelgrass distribution as a basis for site selection for the proposed dry cargo terminal on Sears Island.

## Methods

### Area Covered

A set of 14 maps depicting eelgrass distribution in Penobscot Bay was produced. These full sized set of GIS base maps are 3 x 4 feet at a scale of 1:12,000 and are used for the incorporation of the eelgrass data into the Maine GIS. For inclusion in this report, a set of 14 maps in reduced size (8.5 x 11.0 inches) showing eelgrass in color was created with scales of 1:44,000 or 1:64,000. The maps cover most of Penobscot Bay, from Owls Head on the western shore in Rockland north to Bucksport and south to Stonington, excluding North Haven and Vinalhaven. Maps for the western shore of Penobscot Bay (Maps PB1-PB5) are arranged as an overlapping series along the coastline (see map of Penobscot Bay Eelgrass Habitat Manuscript Location). The nine remaining maps of the eelgrass survey area in Penobscot Bay are depicted on a grid system (see map of Penobscot Bay Eelgrass Habitat Manuscript Location).

### Determining and Mapping Eelgrass Distribution

Aerial photography (1:12,000) for the project was made by J.W. Sewall Company of Old Town, Maine, from flights on October 4 and October 7, 1992. Approximately 300 color positive 9 x 9 inch photographs were produced. The photographs were generally of acceptable quality, except that they were not made during optimum conditions (spring low tide). Thus, determination of the lower depth limit of the eelgrass beds from the photographs was difficult in some areas. Additionally, the photographs from the two days did not have the same degree of tidal exposure, creating differences in our ability to delineate beds depending on the day of the photography. However, the time window during which the photography was done was appropriate and the photographs produced were of sufficient quality to map eelgrass distribution.

Possible eelgrass areas were outlined on a transparent sheet overlain on each aerial photograph using a light table. Then the presence and extent of eelgrass was determined by field checking and marked on the transparencies. Two methods of field checking these possible beds were employed. For the areas covered by the two maps near Sears Island (Maps PB1 and PB2),

possible beds were ground truthed in a boat using both visual inspection and divers. Eelgrass beds for the other twelve maps were checked at low altitude in a light plane. Details for the field checking activities are given in the following section.

Following field checking, polygons indicating eelgrass beds were transferred to GIS base maps printed on Mylar™ sheets. The GIS base maps were provided by the Department of Marine Resources and by the Maine Department of Transportation at a scale of 1 to 12,000. The data were transferred to each GIS base map on a light table by overlaying the translucent base map on each pair of transparencies and photographs of the Bay and aligning the physical features of the Bay with features indicated on the GIS map (i.e., shorelines, roads). With careful positioning of photographs, and utilizing only the central 6 x 6 inch area of each photograph to avoid the distortion caused by the curvature of the camera lens, the outlines of suspected and confirmed areas of submerged vegetation were marked with indelible ink.

### Field Checking

An essential step in the development of the eelgrass distribution map was to perform low elevation aerial surveillance of all suspected eelgrass areas. Flying at low elevation (300 to 1000 feet) around the shoreline of Penobscot Bay in October 1993 and September 1994, it was possible to eliminate from the map any suspected areas that could be determined from the air not to be eelgrass beds. Mussel beds and most dense algal beds could be distinguished from eelgrass beds using low level aerial surveillance. On the other hand, many of the possible beds were confirmed by the procedure (green on colored maps), while others could neither be confirmed nor rejected (yellow on colored maps).

Groundtruth activities were limited to the northwest side of the Bay (Maps PB1 and PB2) near Sears Island. Assessment by boat and using scuba was done from Sandy Point in Stockton Springs to Browns Head in East Northport around the northwest portion of Penobscot Bay in July 1994. Groundtruthing was done by observation from a boat at low tide and by scuba diving at high tide to determine the presence or absence of eelgrass at possible eelgrass sites demarcated on the photographs and transparencies. Groundtruthing was especially important to determine the extent of eelgrass distribution at its lower depth limit. Groundtruth assessment of the area covered



by the two maps allowed determination of an approximate accuracy of the findings of eelgrass distribution which were not groundtruthed, but checked with low level aerial surveillance only.

The water depth at the seaward edge of eelgrass beds (lower depth limit) was determined during groundtruthing. A weighted tape measure was dropped from the side of the boat, and positioned over the deep edge of a given bed. A diver on the bottom held the measuring tape to the edge of the eelgrass bed, and a measurement was taken to the water's surface. The measurement was then adjusted to mean low tide using the appropriate correction for the time of the measurement (Tide Tables, NOAA 1993).

### Photointerpretation

In general, the minimum-size of an eelgrass bed that can be detected with aerial photography is a function of eelgrass density, eelgrass patch size, and water depth and clarity, along with the resolution of the photographs (e.g., plane altitude, film quality). However, in the case of this mapping project, the time gap between the photography (1992) and the groundtruthing (1993, 1994) precludes clear determination of the size of a minimum detectable eelgrass bed. Because more than a year passed between the time of the photography and the groundtruthing, the eelgrass beds may have expanded or contracted before groundtruthing. Based on general experience and observation of other objects (boats, docks) in the photographs, a patch of approximately 6 feet in diameter is the minimum observable size of an eelgrass bed for the photography used in this project. Due to the limitations of depicting the outline of an eelgrass bed, the minimum sized bed mapped for this project was approximately 12 feet in diameter.

## **Results**

For maps PB1 and PB2, included in this report, eelgrass areas now groundtruthed are marked in green. Areas suspected of being eelgrass beds that proved not to be eelgrass after groundtruthing were shown to be either macroalgal beds or mussel beds covered with dense algal growth. A few areas on maps PB1 and PB2 were not examined by boat; these are shown in yellow and remain to be groundtruthed.

For all other maps, low level aerial surveys were used to field check the beds. For these maps green (colored reduced maps) or clear (full-sized GIS maps) polygons have positive field checks, whereas yellow areas (colored maps) or polygons marked with a "g" (GIS maps) depict overlooked or uncertain areas. Based on accuracy determinations from groundtruthing maps PB1 and PB2, possible eelgrass areas marked in yellow have between a 50 and 75% likelihood of being eelgrass beds and still require field verification. Areas marked in green on the remaining maps have an 87% likelihood of being eelgrass, again based on ground truth assessment following low level aerial surveillance of suspected beds on maps PB1 and PB2. .

Eelgrass was found to be widely distributed over the northwest portion of Penobscot Bay, with eelgrass beds occurring off Sandy Point, in Stockton Harbor, around Sears Island, and in the mouth of Belfast Bay. In other areas such as the west side of Long Cove and south of Searsport, eelgrass was found to occur in numerous small patches along the shoreline. In some places, eelgrass did not occur in dense beds or patches but was distributed sparsely over a rather extensive area. "Dense" is defined as greater than 50% cover of eelgrass; "sparse" is defined as less than 50% cover, assessed by observing a measured area and determining the amount of eelgrass relative to unvegetated mud. "Fifty percent cover" is a designation which denotes eelgrass covering one half the area of the bottom upon visual inspection from above.

The overall condition of eelgrass in northwest Penobscot Bay appeared to be quite good with, in most cases, healthy long green leaves and sexually reproductive plants visible at most sites. The notable exceptions were inner parts of Belfast Harbor where eelgrass blades were heavily coated with epiphytes and water quality conditions appeared to be disadvantageous to eelgrass growth, and off Sandy Point in northern Penobscot Bay where eelgrass seemed to be limited in its depth distribution, again due to poor water clarity conditions, as seen from aerial photography and during groundtruthing. Another site where eelgrass appeared to be growing in less than healthy conditions was adjacent to the shoreline loading facility of the Mack Point Pier operation. The eelgrass at this site had a yellow tinge, many dead blades, heavy epiphytic algal growth on the blades and/or blades coated with sediment. Also, at this site eelgrass was very sparse. Sparse eelgrass beds with extensive epiphytic growth on the blade have often been noted in areas with excessive nutrient or other stresses (Short et al. 1989).

Along the west side of Sears Island, extensive eelgrass beds were observed growing to an average depth of 9.7 feet below mean low tide. Off Sandy Point, eelgrass only grew to a depth of 2.3 feet below mean low tide. Eelgrass off Browns Head south of Belfast grew to an average depth of 8.3 feet below mean low tide.

## Discussion

Eelgrass was found in many protected shallow areas along the northwestern shore of Penobscot Bay, the area where groundtruth surveys were completed (Maps PB1 and PB2). Eelgrass throughout the Bay was found growing in sediment that ranged from a soft muddy silt in areas like Stockton Harbor to sand and sand interspersed between cobble on the shoreline south of Belfast. At the northern end of Penobscot Bay and in areas near urban development, eelgrass distribution appears to be limited by poor water quality conditions. In other areas, eelgrass distribution is naturally limited by lack of suitable substrata to support growth, as in the exposed shoreline areas off the south end of Sears Island and the northern shore of outer Belfast Harbor.

Eelgrass beds were found with lower depth limits as deep as 9.7 and as shallow as 2.3 feet. These depth findings are restricted to the northwest portion of Penobscot Bay where groundtruth assessments were made. In general, water clarity controls depth distribution of eelgrass. In Penobscot Bay, the variability of water clarity leads to differences in the lower depth limit of eelgrass. Sandy Point, at the outfall of the Penobscot River, appears to have restricted eelgrass distribution, which may result from poor water color and high sediment load, both emanating from the river. Overall, eelgrass distribution in upper Penobscot Bay appears to be more restricted by lack of water clarity than eelgrass elsewhere in the Bay.

The remainder of the western shore (Maps PB3-PB5) has some fairly large eelgrass beds, primarily associated with protected harbor areas, particularly Duck Harbor and Rockland Harbor. Eelgrass is found extensively along the coast of Islesboro (Maps B2-B4; Maps C2 and C3), the largest beds located at the southern end of the island chain, where eelgrass is often found in protected coves and harbors.

In the Penobscot River and upper Penobscot Bay (Maps C1 and C2), several areas of possible eelgrass were detected but these could not be confirmed by low level aerial survey. Likewise in Castine Harbor and the mouth of the Bagaduce River (Map C2), a number of possible eelgrass areas were identified. Smith Cove (Maps C2 and C3) had fairly widespread eelgrass areas. The rest of Cape Rosier (Map C3) had only small, isolated beds within cove and harbor areas. The possible eelgrass beds around Hog Island (Map C3) are extensive and deserve field verification. The largest stands of eelgrass found in Penobscot Bay were in the Bagaduce River (Maps D2 and D3), where beds cover large portions of the estuarine river bottom. Upstream of a tidal restriction, eelgrass is found covering the entire river bottom (Maps D2 and D3) as the restriction prevents this area from draining at low tide. Numerous eelgrass beds are found on the western shore of Deer Isle in harbors and coves (Maps D3 and D4).

Comparison of the current survey of eelgrass distribution in Penobscot Bay with the previous survey made in 1976 (Timson 1976) is inconclusive even for the areas where groundtruthing was done in 1993-94. In the 1970s, no eelgrass was identified around Sears Island, an extensive bed was evident in Stockton Harbor, and a bed existed at the head of Long Cove. In the 1990s, extensive eelgrass was found around Sears Island, the eelgrass bed in Stockton Harbor was similar in size and shape to the bed mapped in the '70s, while the bed at the head of Long Cove, initially identified as a possible eelgrass bed in the 1990s, was upon groundtruthing found to be a mussel bed with a heavy growth of furoid algae. Given the limited groundtruthing in the 1970s (2% of the shoreline), and the incongruity of the '70s and '90s information, it is not prudent to infer trends in eelgrass distribution or extent.

Eelgrass habitats provide many functions that maintain the ecological health of estuaries: improving water quality through filtration, reducing subaqueous erosion, providing a food source, and creating fish and waterfowl habitat (Short 1992, Thayer et al. 1984). Eelgrass meadows act as a filter of estuarine waters, removing both suspended sediments and dissolved nutrients (Short and Short 1984). And eelgrass traps suspended sediments, clarifying estuarine waters and reducing resuspension of sediments (Ward et al. 1989). The beds provide a breeding area and nursery for young finfish and shellfish such as flounder, tom cod, scallops, mussels, crab, and lobster

(Thayer et al. 1984, Newell et al. 1991, Short et al. 1994). Eelgrass areas are frequent stopping points for migrating waterfowl, many of which consume the leaves or seeds of the plant (Milne and Milne 1951). Additionally, eelgrass is an important basis of the detrital food chain, contributing organic matter to the estuary (Fenchel and Blackburn 1979).

Overall, eelgrass is found throughout the area surveyed in Penobscot Bay, Maine in disjunct beds located largely but not entirely in protected harbors and coves. The most extensive stands of eelgrass were in the protected waters of the Bagaduce River above an area of tidal restriction. The eelgrass beds delineated in this study represent an important habitat for marine resources in Penobscot Bay and the Gulf of Maine. The area of possible and confirmed beds is small relative to the entire Bay and small relative to the area of the Bay with proper depths for eelgrass growth (between MLW and 10 feet below MLW). Thus, with improvements in water clarity throughout the Bay, the distribution of eelgrass could expand considerably. Nonetheless, the beds shown in the maps represent a widespread and extremely important estuarine habitat that is distributed throughout Penobscot Bay.

## EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAPS FOR PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE

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Map numbers	Location
Site map	Penobscot Bay Eelgrass Habitat Manuscript Locations
PB1	Sears Island
PB2	Belfast Bay
PB 3	Lincolnton
PB4	Camden
PB5	Rockland
B2	Searsport
B3	Islesboro
B4	North Haven West
C1	Bucksport
C2	Castine
C3	Cape Rosier
C4	Penobscot
D3	Sargentville
D4	Deer Isle

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Milne, L. J. and M. J. Milne. 1951. The eelgrass catastrophe. *Scient. Am.* 184:52-55.

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**A**

**B**

**C**






**D**

**E**

Penobscot Bay Eelgrass Habitat  
Manuscript Locations

MeDMR 12/09/93 SLB

LEGEND

-  Roads
-  24k Quad Boundaries
-  Coastline - MHW
-  Streams and Ponds
-  Manuscript Boundaries

**1**

**2**

**3**

**4**

**5**

PB1

PB2

PB3

PB4

PB6

PB7

PB8

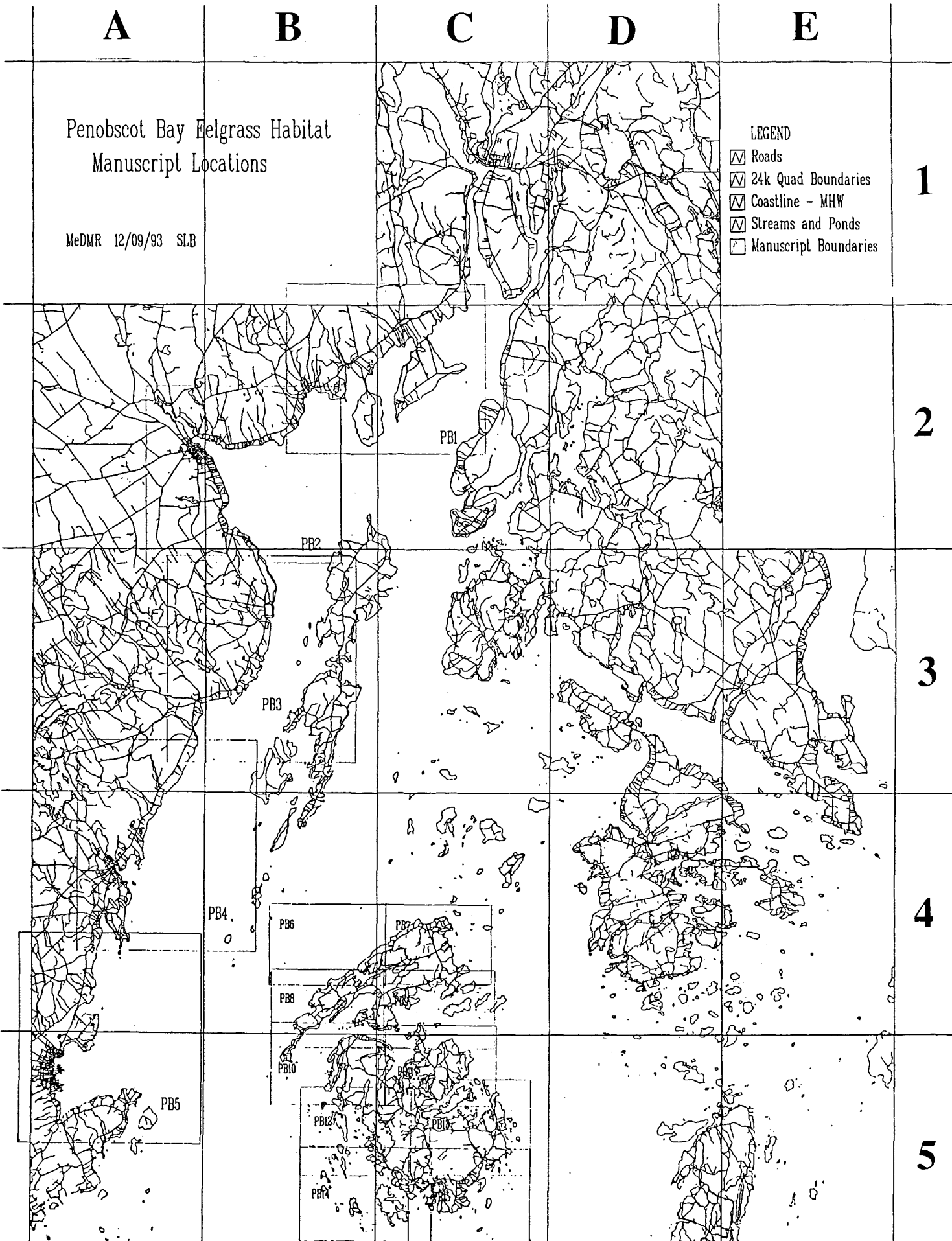
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PB12

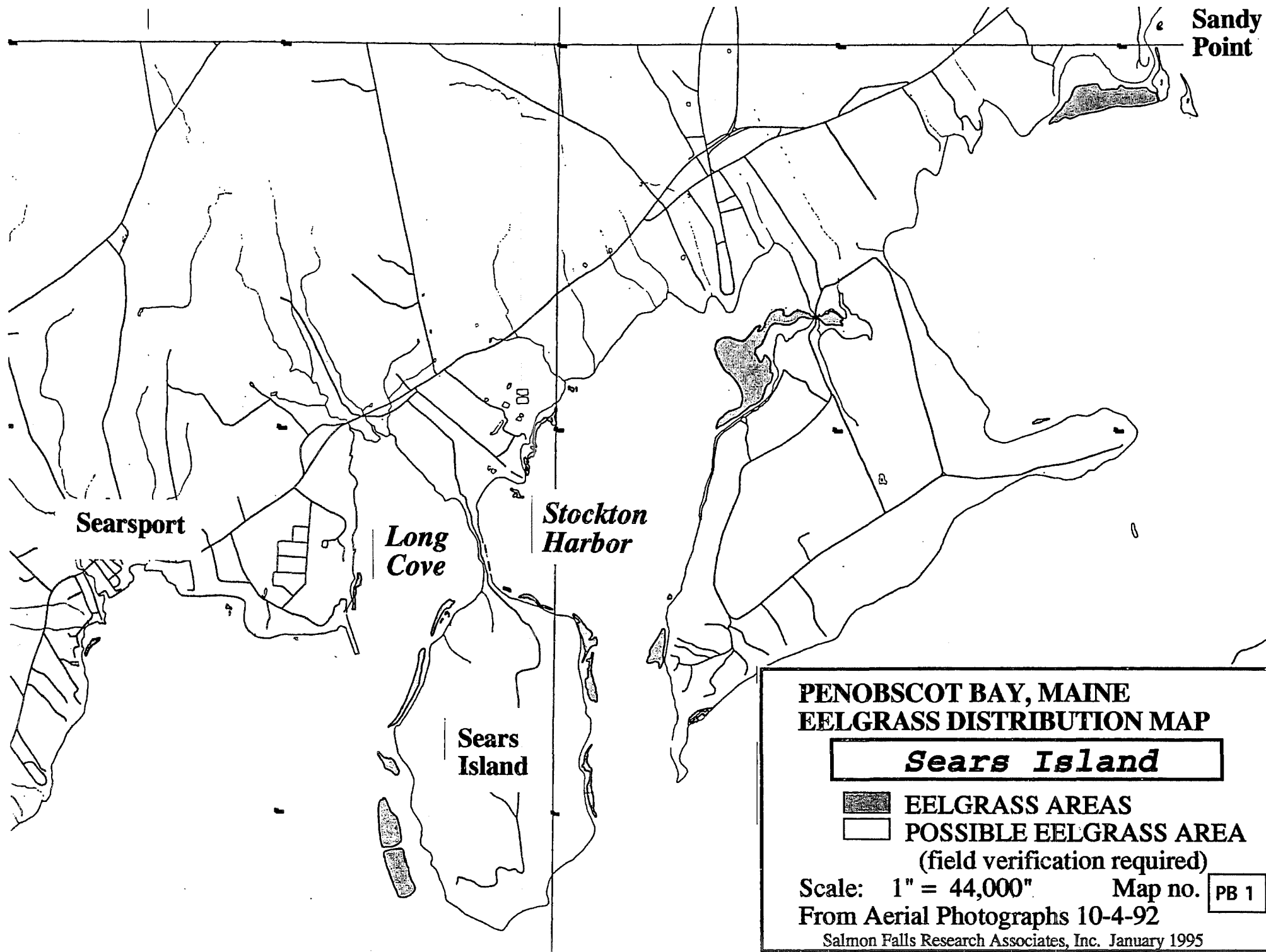
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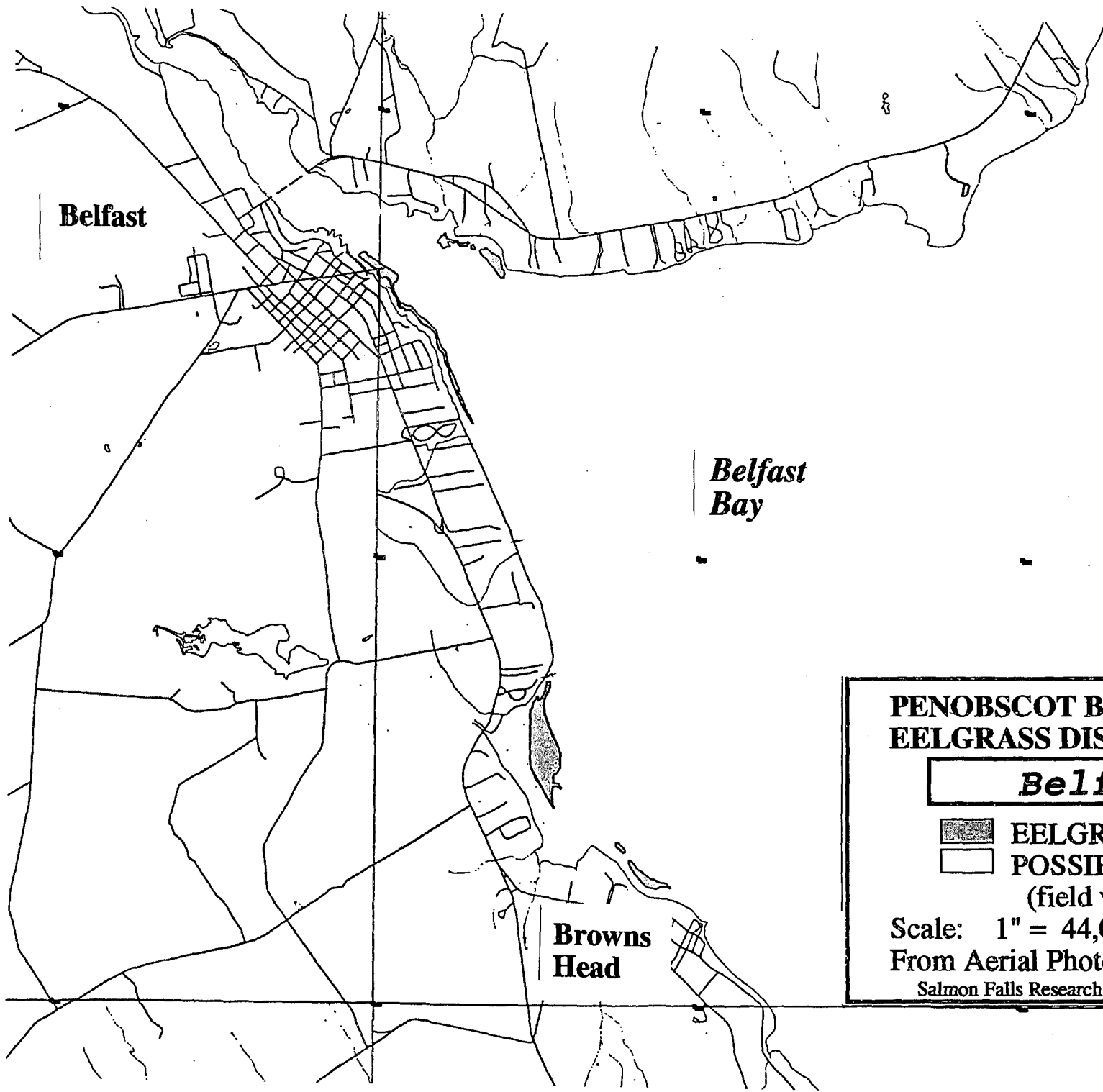
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PB5







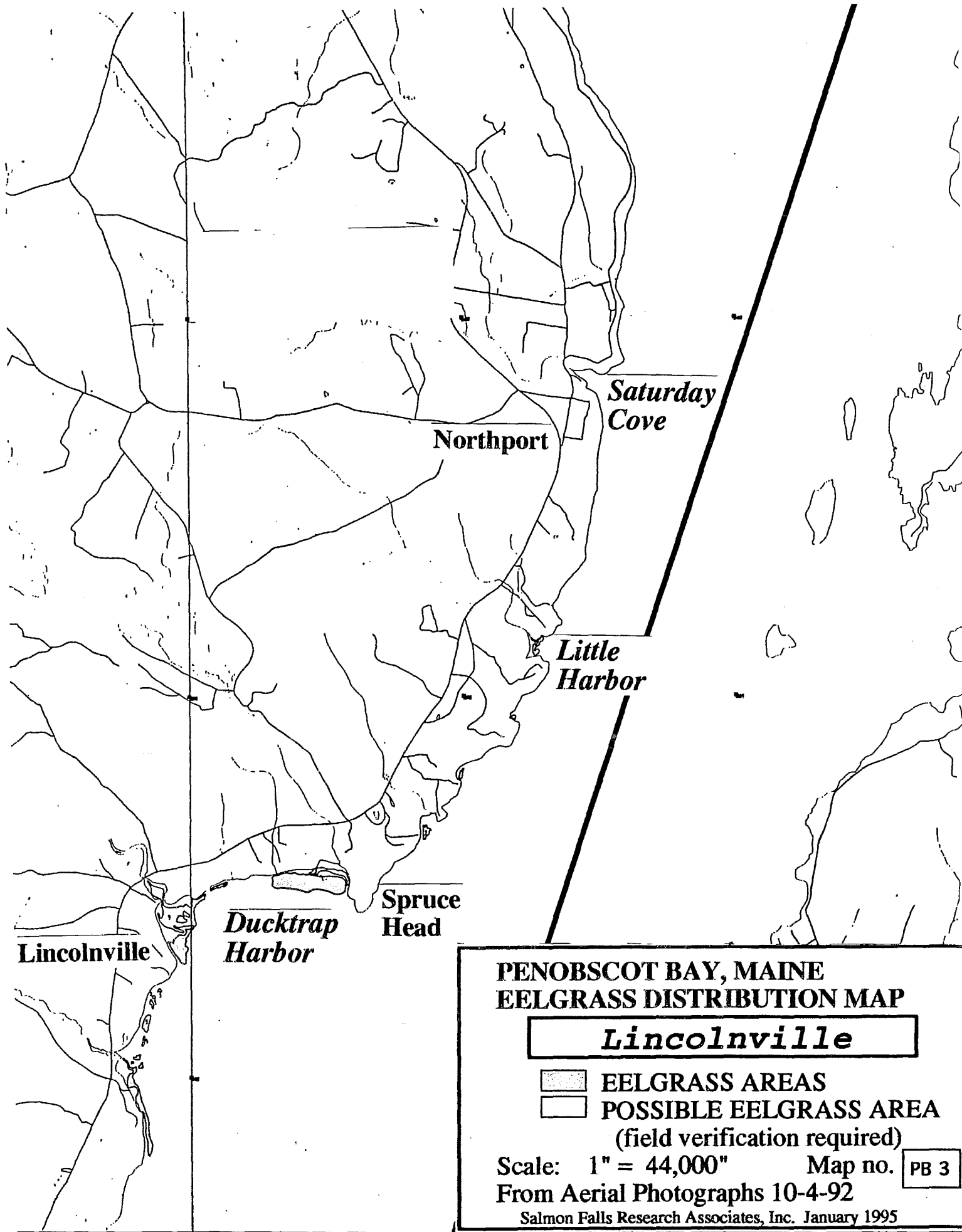


**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

***Belfast Bay***



-  **EELGRASS AREAS**
-  **POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)**

Scale: 1" = 44,000"      Map no. **PB 2**  
From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



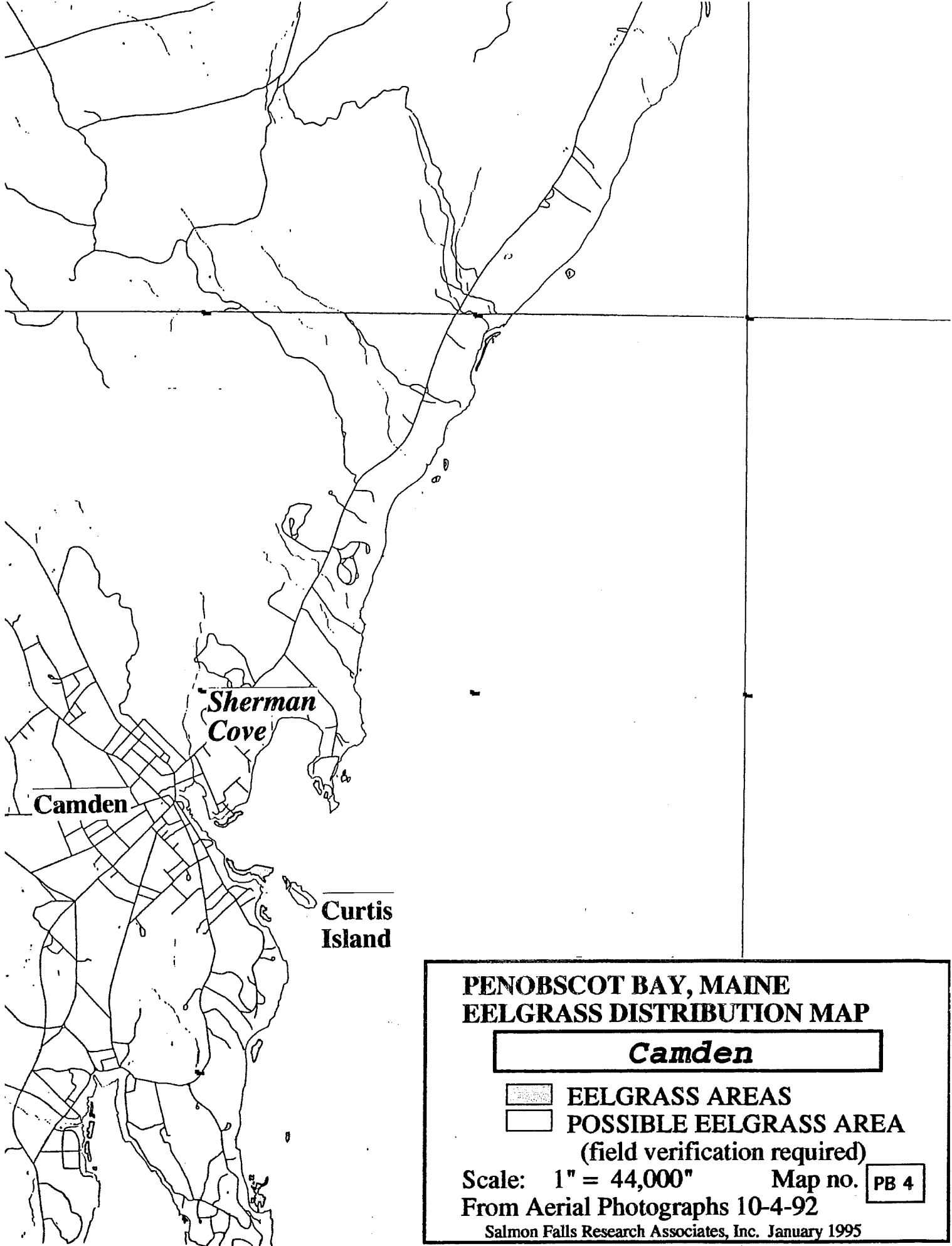
**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

***Lincolnville***

-  **EELGRASS AREAS**
-  **POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA**  
(field verification required)



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From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

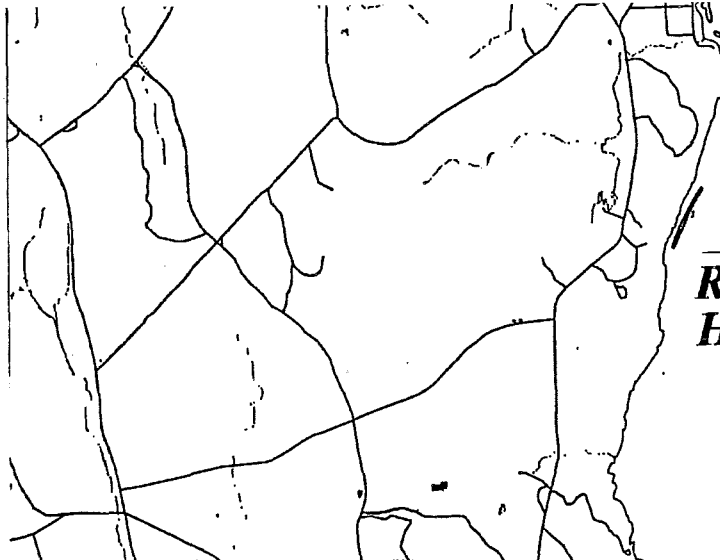
***Camden***

-  **EELGRASS AREAS**
-  **POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA**  
(field verification required)

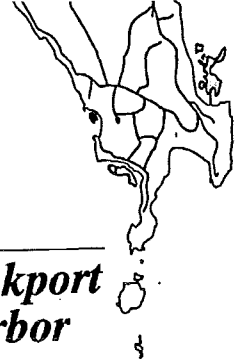
**Scale: 1" = 44,000"      Map no. PB 4**

**From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92**

**Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995**



**Rockport  
Harbor**



**Brewster  
Point**





**Rockland**

**Rockland  
Harbor**

**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

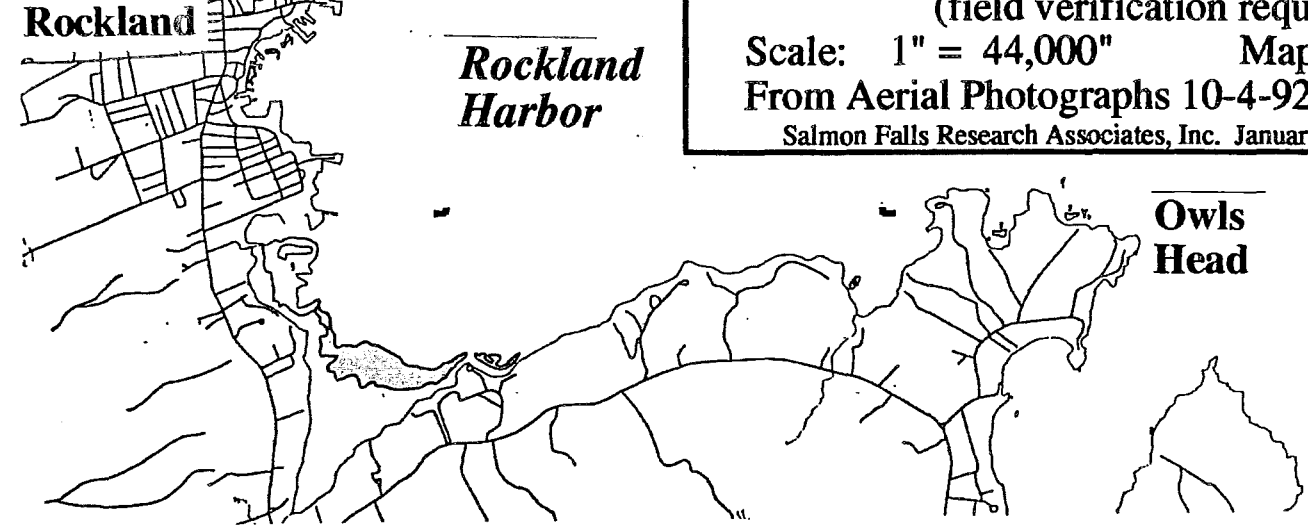
**Rockland**

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 44,000"      Map no. **PB 5**

From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92



Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



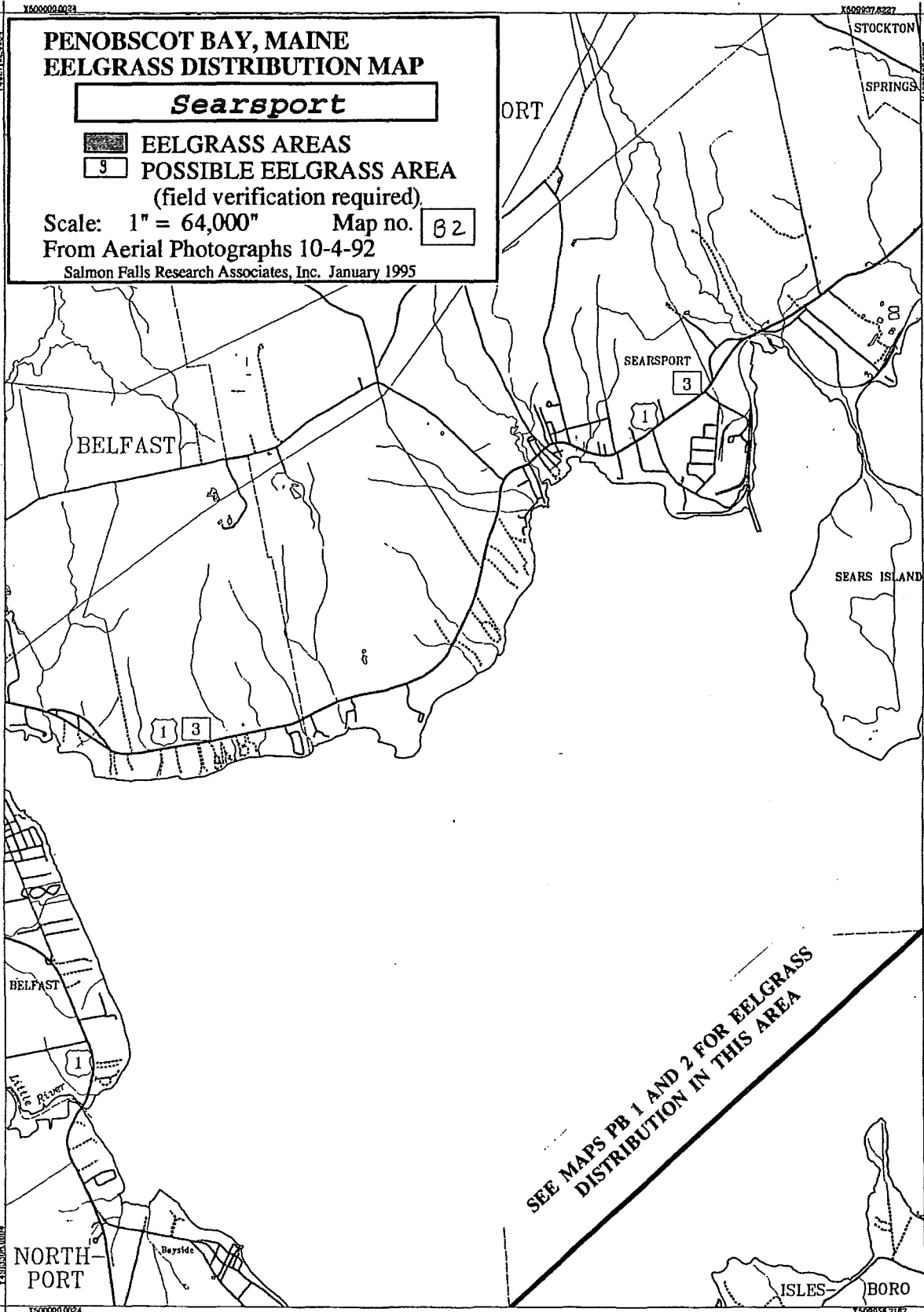
**Owls  
Head**

**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

**Searsport**

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000" Map no. **62**  
From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995





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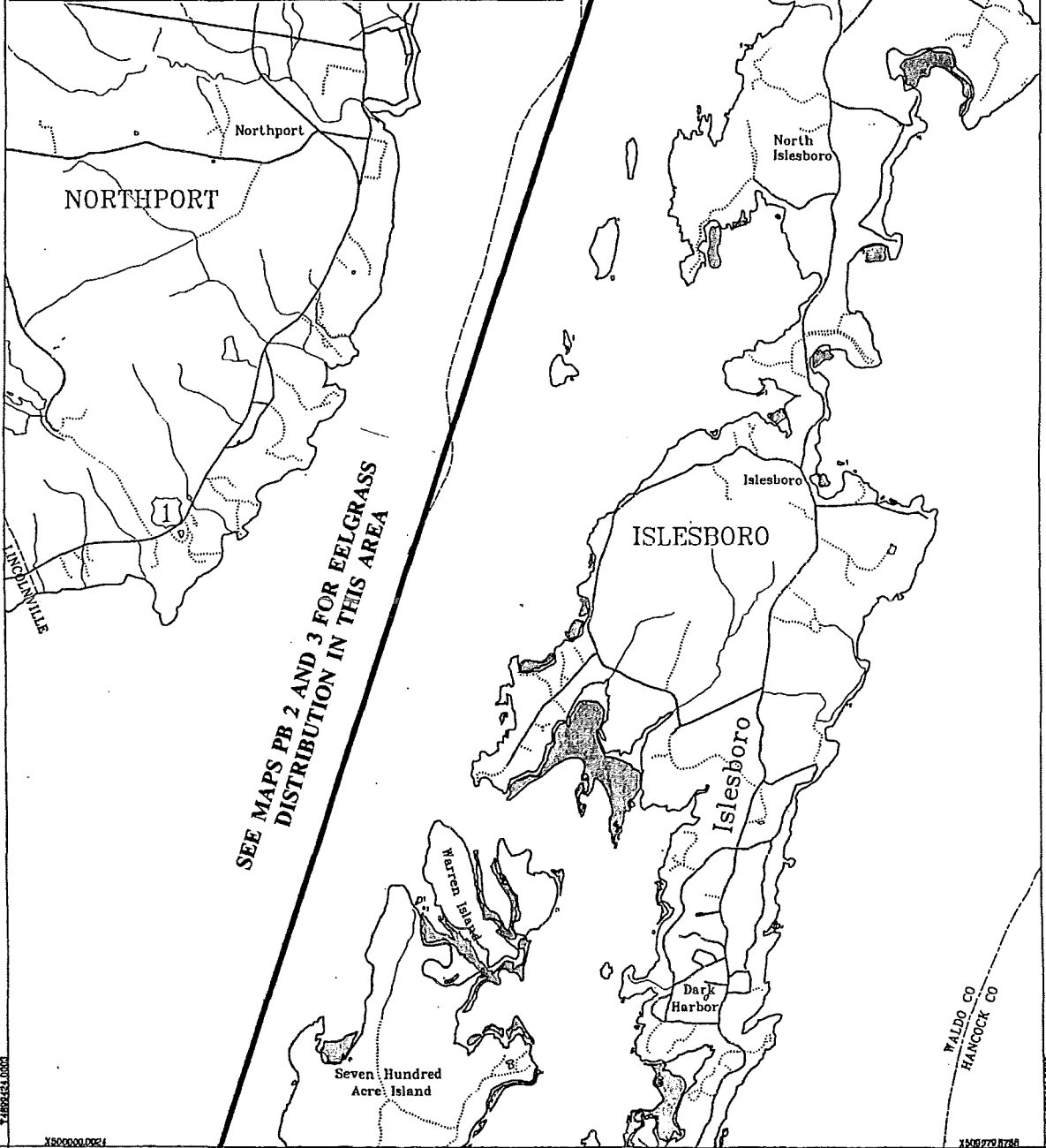
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# PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP

## Islesboro

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000"      Map no. 83  
 From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
 Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



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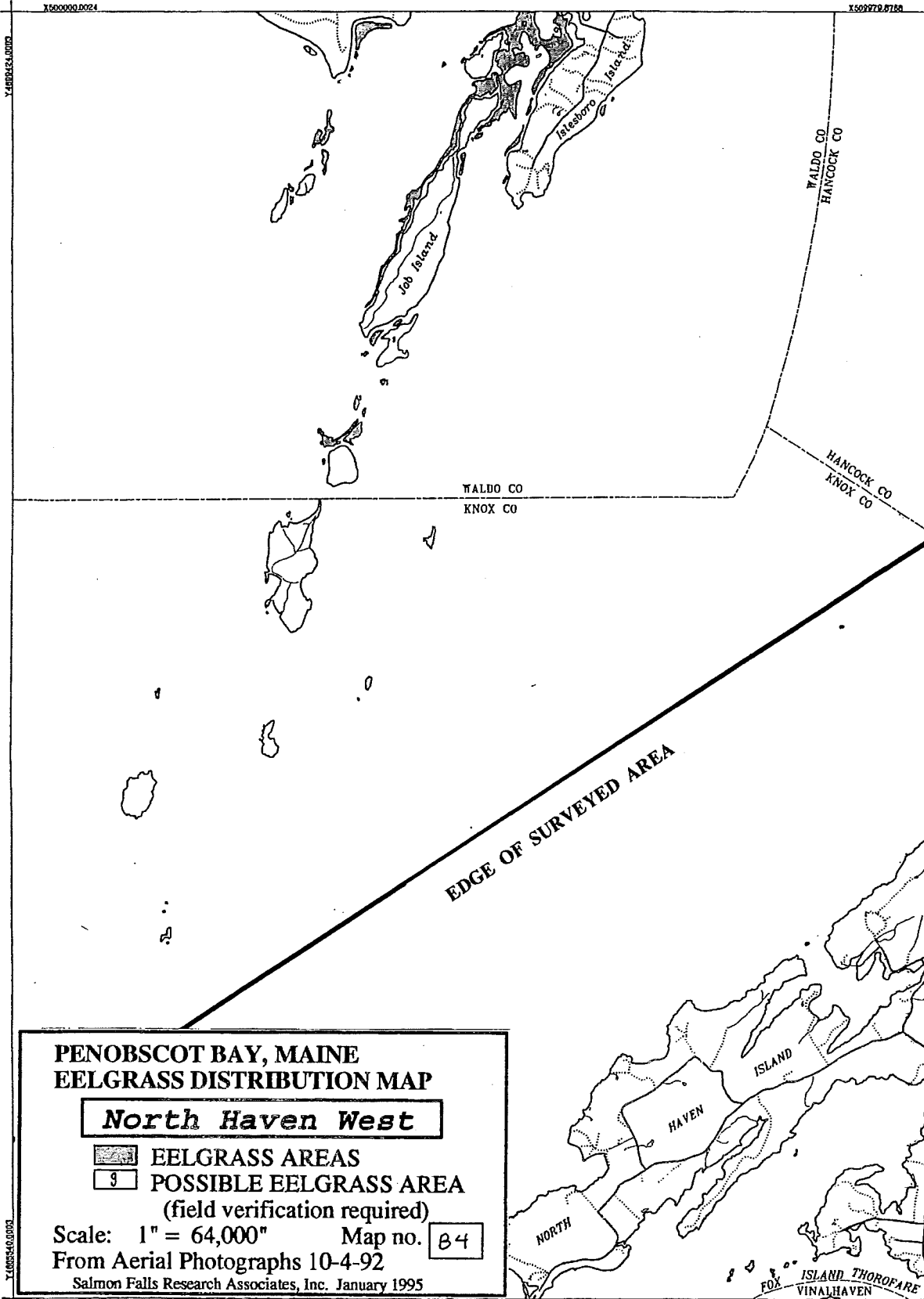
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**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

***North Haven West***

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000"      Map no. 84  
 From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
 Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995

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


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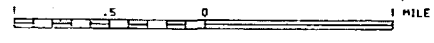
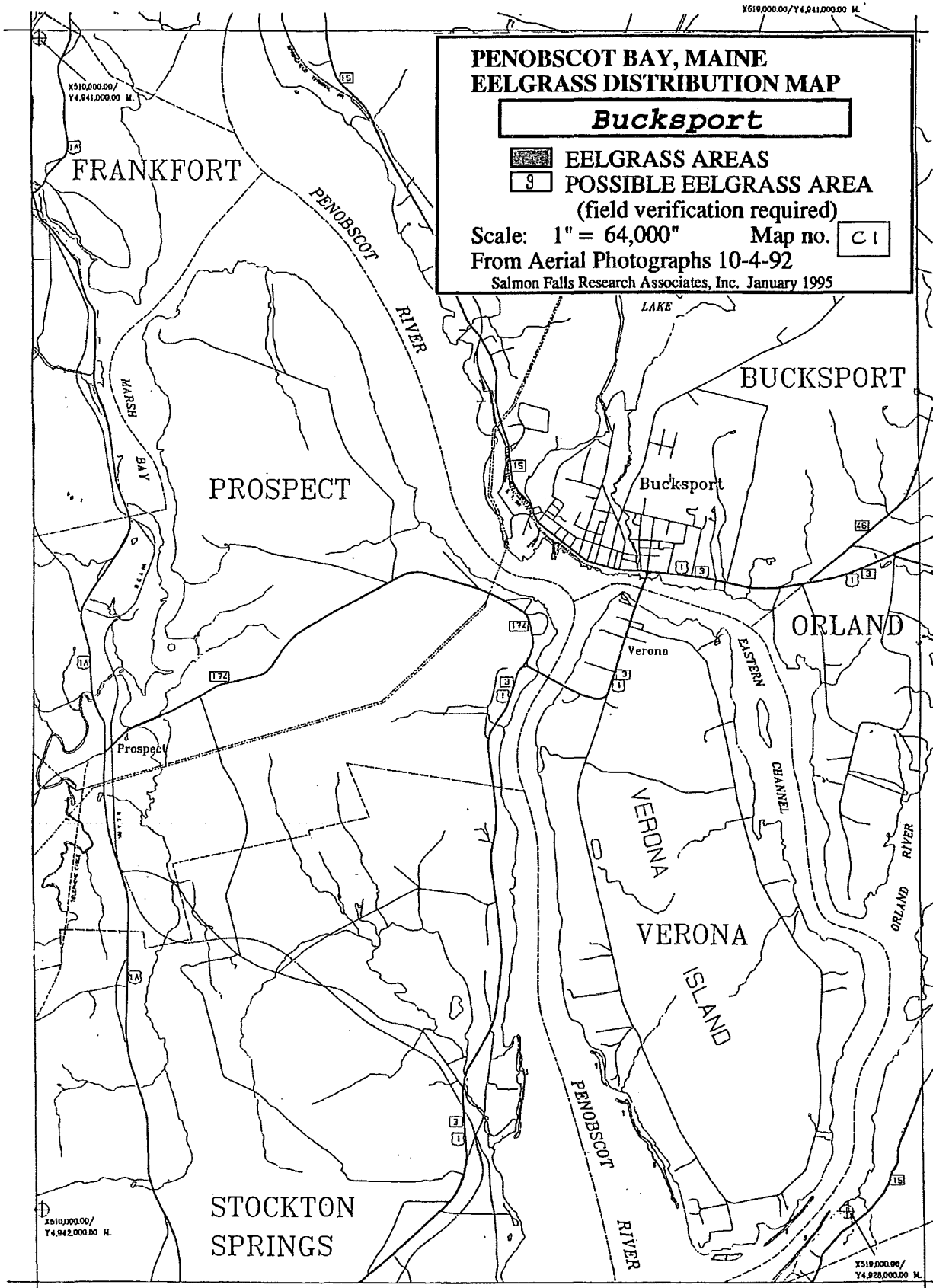
# PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP

## **Bucksport**

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000" Map no. C1

From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



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
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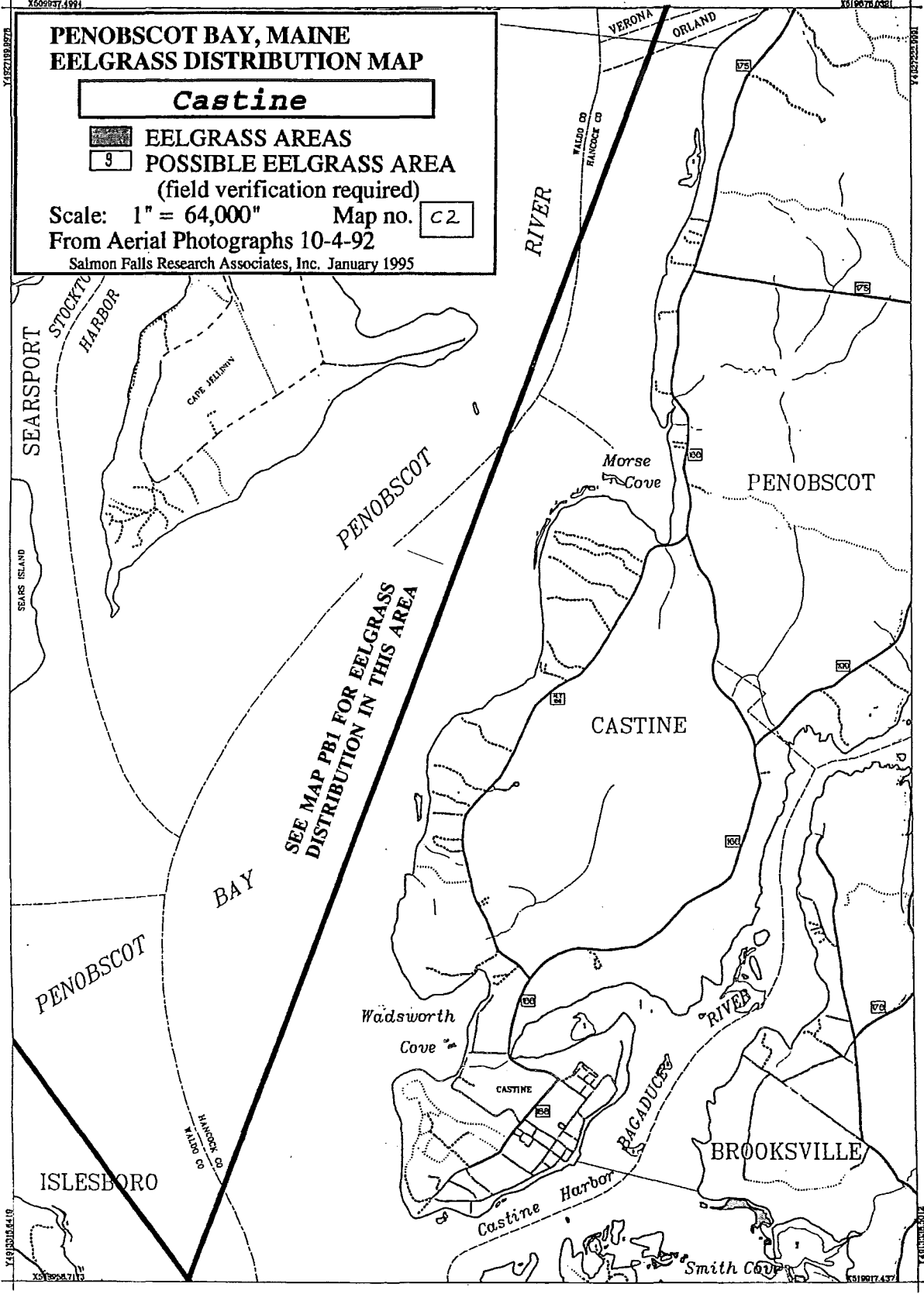
X319076.0281

# PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP

## Castine

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000" Map no. C2  
 From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
 Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



Y4910015.6419

X519058.7119

Y4910015.6419

X519017.4371

Y4898431.4208


Y4898431.4208


X369978713

X369978713

**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

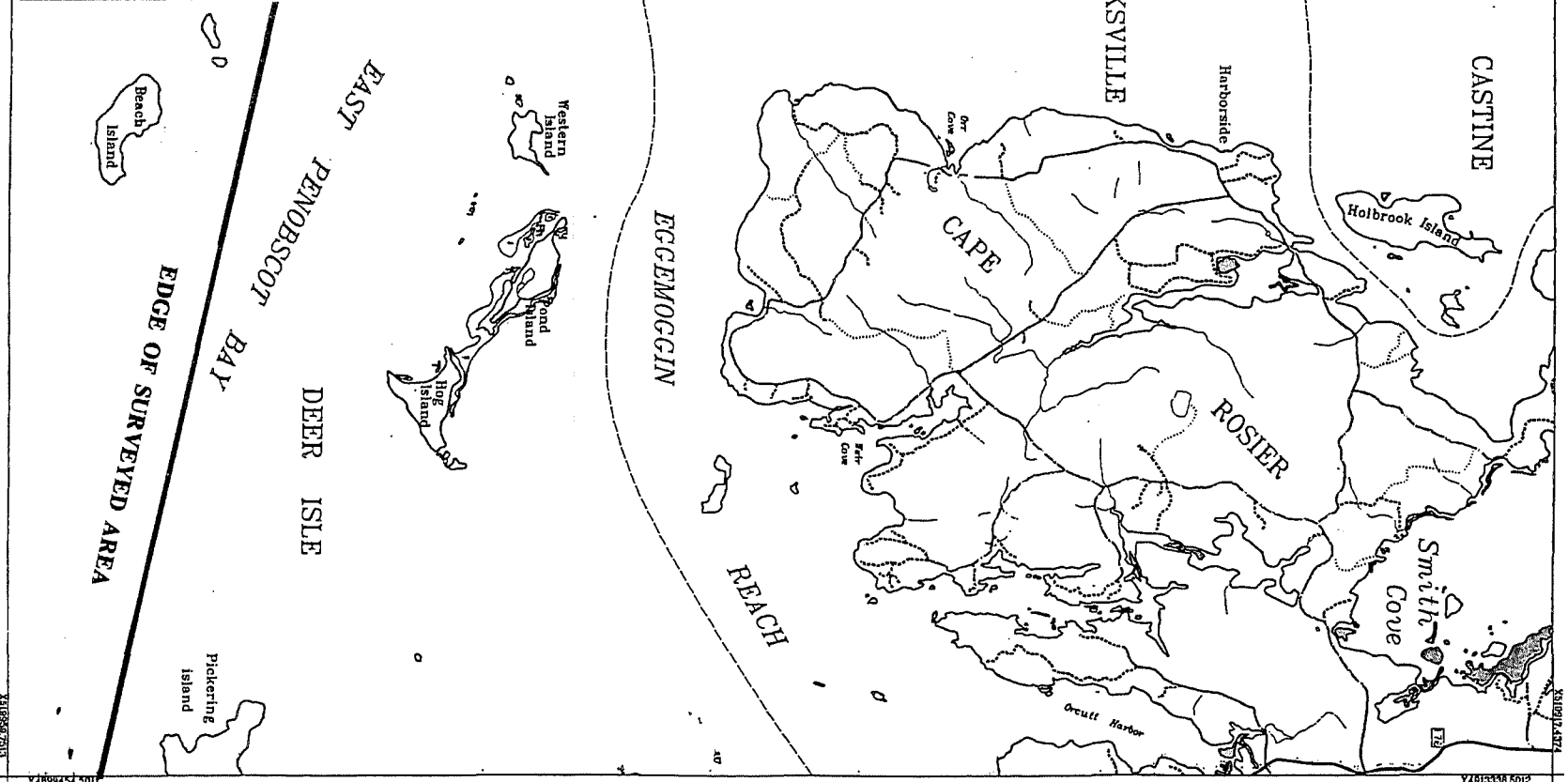
**Cape Rosier**

 **EELGRASS AREAS**

 **POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA**  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000" Map no. **C3**

From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



Y4899454.3012

Y4899454.3012

X3189807513



X3189807513

X518078.0321

X528012.1988

# PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP

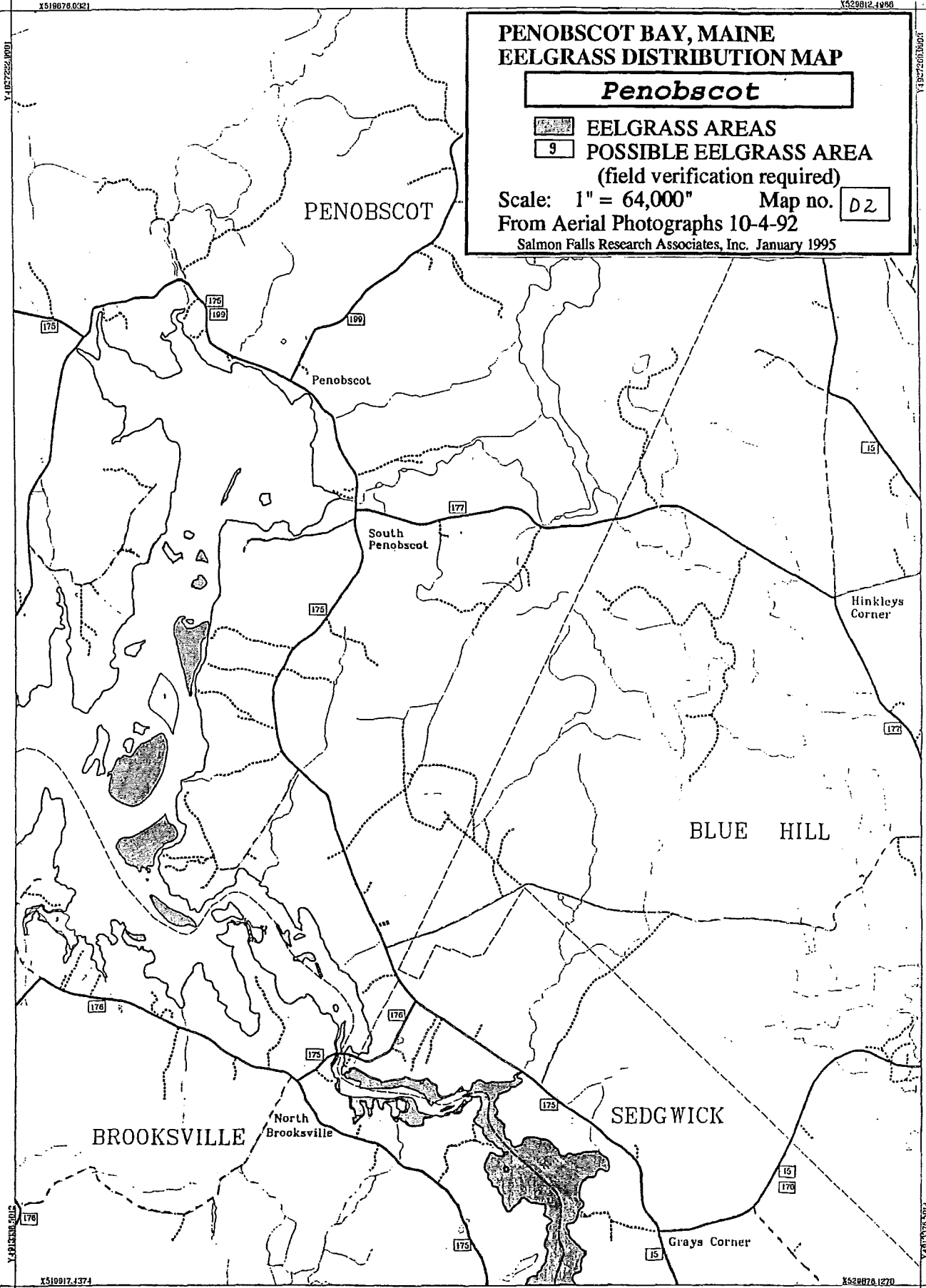
## Penobscot

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000" Map no. **D2**


From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92

Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995

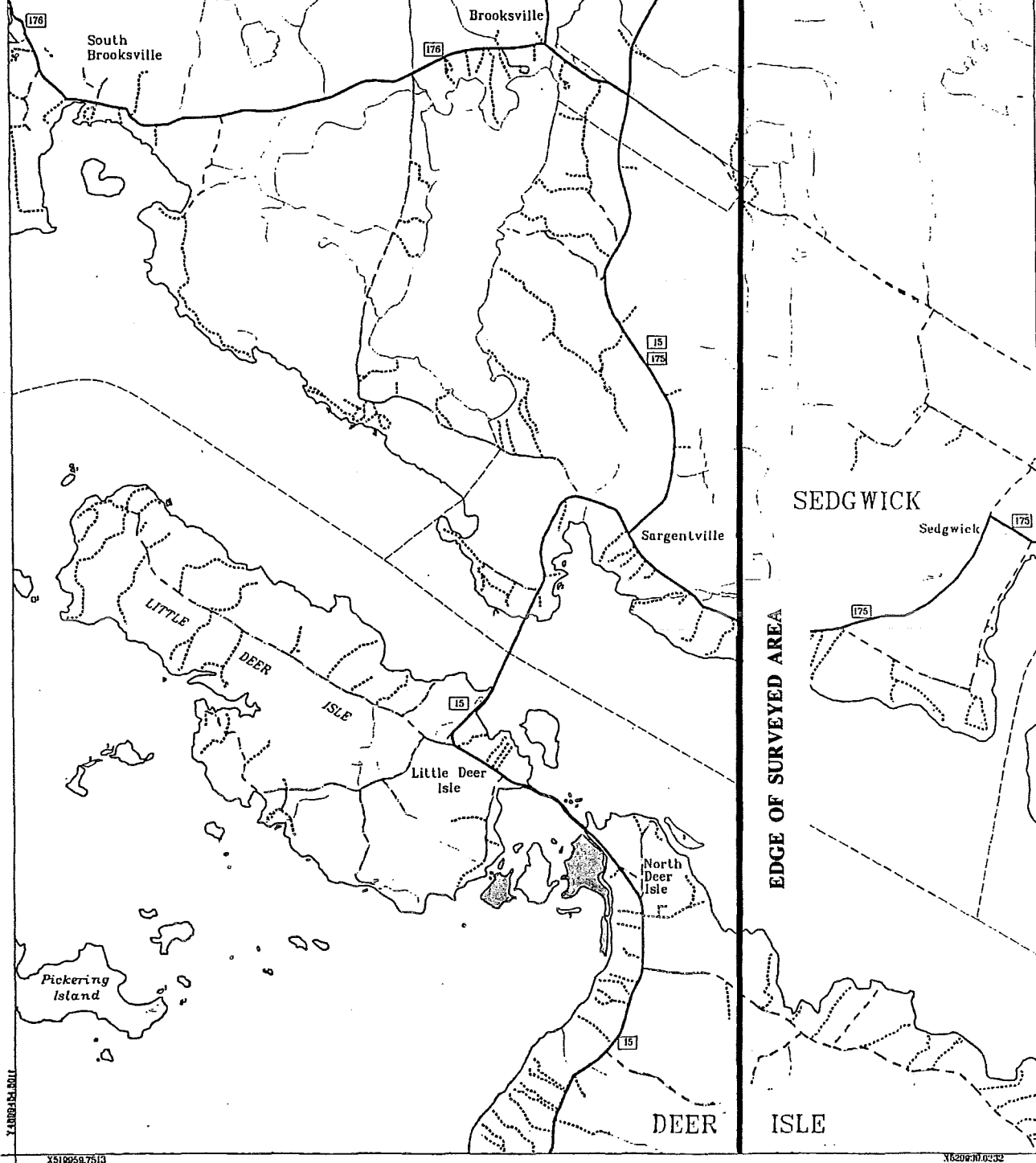


# PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP

## Sargentville

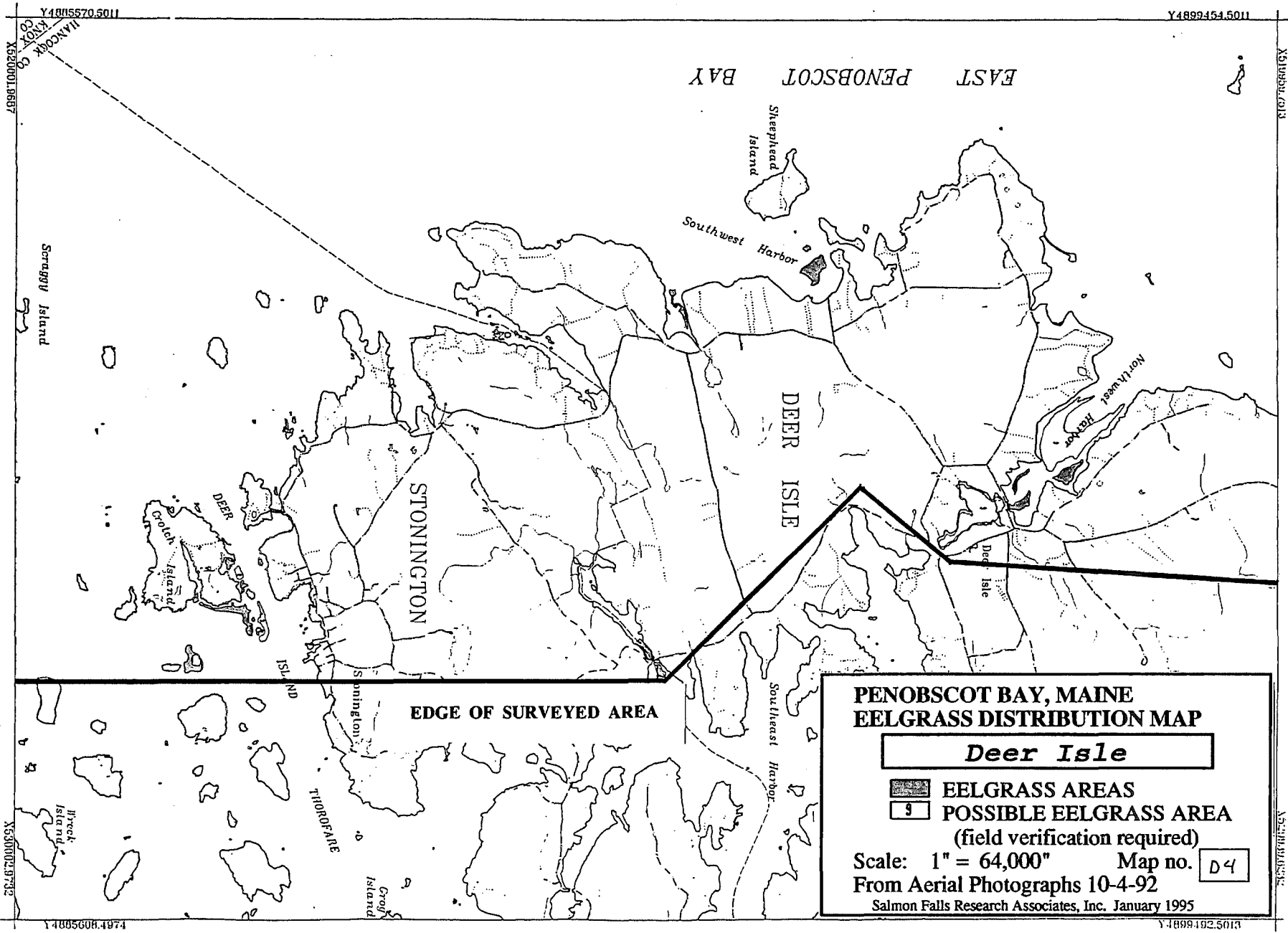
-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000" Map no. **D3**  
 From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
 Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995



Y4913388.5012

Y4913378.5014



EAST PENOBSCOT BAY

DEER ISLE

STONINGTON

EDGE OF SURVEYED AREA

**PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE  
EELGRASS DISTRIBUTION MAP**

**Deer Isle**

-  EELGRASS AREAS
-  POSSIBLE EELGRASS AREA  
(field verification required)

Scale: 1" = 64,000" Map no. **D4**  
 From Aerial Photographs 10-4-92  
 Salmon Falls Research Associates, Inc. January 1995

HANCOCK CO  
 KNOX CO  
 119505570.5011  
 X520001.8687  
 Straggly Island  
 DEER  
 Gull Island  
 Sheep Island  
 1195608.4974  
 X530002.8732

X51999.0213  
 119599454.5011  
 X51999.0213  
 X51999.0213  
 119599492.5013