

Federal Action Sought for Florida Coastline Tainted by Algae

July 5, 2016



An aerial photo shows blue-green algae enveloping an area along the St. Lucie River in Stuart. (Greg Lovett/The Palm Beach Post via AP)

The [Gainesville Sun](#) has an article July 5, 2016, brought in from the Associated Press regarding the current crises of failed water quality in parts of Florida. We see that Florida authorities want federal action. Those who do not ignore history will recall that federal help was offered in 2011 in the form of the Clean Water Act, and Florida's leaders rejected this plan, saying "We'll take care of our own water."

"Florida is one of the few states that has a comprehensive

program in place to address excess nutrients, and we continue to lead the nation in developing innovative tools to ensure the health of our state's waterways," (Gov. Rick Scott, 2011.)

But Scott didn't act alone:

Attorney General Pam Bondi filed a lawsuit challenging the standards earlier this year. Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, who chairs the House's Select Committee on Water Policy, filed HB 239, which orders the Florida DEP to ignore the EPA standards. The House passed the bill Thursday with a 90-27 vote. Twelve Democrats joined Republicans in supporting the measure.

Similar bills filed by Sens. Greg Evers, R-Crestview and Charlie Dean, R-Inverness, are stalled in Senate committees.

(all quotes from [Tampa Bay Times](#), April 22, 2011) Continue reading for the *Times* article.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-



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By The Associated Press

STUART – Officials want federal action along a stretch of

Florida's Atlantic coast where the governor has declared a state of emergency over algae blooms.

The blue-green algae is the latest contaminant in yearslong arguments over water flowing from Lake Okeechobee, which is critical to South Florida's water supply and flood control systems.

The Martin County Commission is inviting the president to view deteriorating water conditions that local officials blame on freshwater being released from the lake, according to a statement released Wednesday.

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Beaches have been closed along the Treasure Coast shoreline, the St. Lucie River and other bodies of water in the county.

"I had to call a couple customers and say, 'You can't go to the beach,'" said Irene Gomes, owner of the Driftwood Motel in Jensen Beach.

Gov. Rick Scott has directed state and local authorities to fast-track water storage projects that could help reduce the algae's spread along the St. Lucie River and other waterways in Martin and St. Lucie counties. Both of Florida's senators plan to visit the area this week.

Critics blame pollutants from Lake Okeechobee, but local stormwater runoff and septic tanks also fuel algae blooms, as has happened in past years when there were no releases, according to a statement from the South Florida Water Management District.

The district's executive director, Peter Antonacci, told TCPalm.com that per the governor's executive order, lakes north

of Lake Okeechobee will start holding back about 20 billion gallons of water that would otherwise flow south and contribute to the releases.

Lake Okeechobee is the largest in Florida and the second largest body of freshwater in the contiguous United States. It's surrounded by an aging, earthen dike that's prone to erosion and considered one of the country's most at-risk for imminent failure.

Flooding around the lake after a major hurricane in 1928 killed at least 2,500 people in surrounding communities of mostly poor, black farmworkers. It inspired the storm central to Zora Neale Hurston's novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God."

To reduce the risk of a breach in the dike built after that hurricane, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers tries to keep water levels in the lake between 12.5 feet and 15.5 feet above sea level. Freshwater is released east and west of the lake into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

Scott has criticized the Obama Administration and the corps for the discharges that local officials say are ruining coastal estuaries. Though water managers are working to direct more water south of Lake Okeechobee into the parched Everglades, federal regulations, conservation mandates and stalled restoration projects complicate those efforts.

"We're always looking for a better solution," Jo-Ellen Darcy, assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works, told the Post on Wednesday.

Martin County officials want the locks closed between Lake Okeechobee and the St. Lucie River and a federal emergency declared to address potential hazards to public health and the local economy.

Murky waters on southwest Florida's Gulf Coast also are being blamed on the lake's discharges. Fort Myers fisherman Kwame Eddy said the waters off Sanibel Island look "like motor oil," WBBH-TV reported.