

State lawmakers begin polluter crackdown

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Welcome words. We hope this long-overdue beginning carries through, although surely the polluters will kick back and fight to continue their planet-destroying pollution activities.

The following is a great article, but shows some confusion and inaccuracies. We are lumping industry and residences and municipal wastewater treatment plants all together. That is fine because all cause harm to our water.

It seems doubtful that many septic tank replacements cost more than the home. Even the new, efficient aerobic systems can be

seven to eight thousand. Also the statement by Rep. Clemons implies one spill from Georgia when in reality these spills have been going on for years, coming down the Suwannee. And when the water sampling finally tells the story, we suspect that the culprit will be not only the Valdosta water treatment plant, but also agriculture interests along the way as indications already show.

To depend on the BMAPs to save us is folly. They have failed, and in our area, the Santa Fe River has deteriorated instead of improved after several years under the BMAP,

Finger pointing continues hot and heavy as to sources, and Mr. Brian Lapointe is but one opinion. We think when the dust settles we will see what many scientists are saying: in urban areas most nitrate pollution is from septics and urban fertilizer, and in rural areas, most nitrate pollution is from agriculture. According to BMAP, in the Santa Fe basin, 75% of nitrogen comes from agriculture, and in the Suwannee basin, 85% from agriculture. From 65-71% needed to meet water quality goal.

Industrial Ag is another story, and Pilgrim's Pride continues to pollute the Suwannee as it has done for years, and dairies and big sugar make their contributions.

We continue the roll begun by Gov. DeSantis with red tide and the algae, but we must keep pointing out that North Florida has a similar crisis not as visually evident: the constant decline in rivers springs and aquifer, as well as increase in nitrates and pollutants. Our springs are dying before our eyes, but we are not looking at them. Our rivers are choked with weeds, but we see only the dead fish down south.

Read the original article in [the Gainesville Sun](#) at this link.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

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

State lawmakers begin polluter crackdown

By [Zac Anderson](#)

Political Editor

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TALLAHASSEE – The crowd packed into a committee room in the basement of the Florida House office building burst into applause last week after Rep. Randy Fine finished delivering an impassioned speech about preventing sewage from spilling into waterways.

“If the sergeant would get the fire extinguisher, I think Representative Fine’s on fire,” joked the committee chairman, Rep. Chuck Clemons.

The importance of the issue also brought out some emotion in Clemons, who said he is “apoplectic” about the sewage spills fouling waterways around the state. Clemons went further. Tapping his fingers on the desk to punctuate his point, he talked about how essential the work is this year of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Subcommittee, which approved some big environmental regulation bills last week.

Clemons mentioned a major sewage spill that recently fouled the Withlacoochee and Suwannee Rivers.

Florida's environmental treasures continue to be degraded, and Clemons said it's time to act.

"We have to get a handle on this today," said the Newberry Republican, thumping the desk twice. "I mean today – meaning this session – we have to get a handle on it."

Whether it's a sewage spill in the Suwannee, red tide in Southwest Florida, blue-green algae pouring into estuaries from Lake Okeechobee, algae-clogged freshwater springs or brown tide in the Indian River Lagoon, Florida's waterways have been under assault.

There has been a lot of big talk from elected leaders about taking action, and big questions about how far Florida's GOP-controlled Legislature is willing to go.

Last week provided an early glimpse of where the Legislature is headed when it comes to regulating the pollution sources that contribute to algae blooms and other water quality problems.

Ticking clock

Substantial – and potentially costly – new regulations on polluters are on the table, something that wasn't clear in the run-up to the 60-day session as Republican legislative leaders and new GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis talked about increasing funding for environmental remediation efforts, but largely avoided diving into the details of regulatory changes they might support.

Yet even as lawmakers began advancing tough new regulations last week on a bipartisan basis, the bills only address one of many pollution sources that contribute to algae problems. Environmental advocates continue to question whether the effort will evolve into something broader, or remain piecemeal and of

limited effectiveness.

GOP leaders in both chambers say there is plenty more to come. But the clock is ticking.

“I think this is the beginning of several pieces of legislation that you’ll see coming from the House,” Clemons said last week as he left a committee meeting where two big environmental bills were approved. “Gov. DeSantis has set the bar that the status quo is no longer acceptable, and I think he’s being met across the state with rousing support for that very movement.”

DeSantis is pledging wholesale changes to how Florida approaches water quality issues.

But the biggest thing that lawmakers have delivered so far is a bill that slaps at municipal utilities for sewage spills. It would fine them \$1 for each gallon spilled or force them to spend \$2 on improving infrastructure. It also would require them to notify nearby homeowners when there’s a spill.

The sewage spill legislation sponsored by state Sen. Joe Gruters, R-Sarasota, and Fine, R-Palm Bay, cleared committees in both chambers last week with the backing of environmental groups and unanimous bipartisan support, along with a bill that would boost permitting requirements for biosolids, or human waste left over from the municipal sewage treatment process.

Algae feed on the nutrients in human waste, so raw sewage spilling into waterways and biosolids leeching off farms – where they are used as fertilizer – and into groundwater or surface water can exacerbate algae problems.

Sewage spills remain a big problem across Florida, with 2.7 billion gallons of untreated human waste spilling into waterways over the last 10 years, including 33 million so far in 2019.

“It is insane,” Gruters said of the sewage spills, adding: “You can’t overlook and ignore when billions of gallons of raw sewage is dumped into our waterways on a consistent basis.”

Worries about cost

But municipal leaders say the sewage spill fines would be extremely costly for local taxpayers, and while environmental leaders support the legislation, they view it as just one piece of a much larger puzzle.

Beyond broken sewage pipes, nutrients can wash into waterways from a wide range of sources, from fertilizer in urban stormwater runoff, to leaky septic tanks and farm runoff. Legislation has been filed to address many of these issues, but has yet to advance.

Gruters also has a bill, sponsored in the House by Bradenton GOP state Rep. Will Robinson, that would require septic tanks to be inspected every five years.

Since Robinson filed his bill four months ago, it has not moved through a single committee in the Florida House or Senate.

The septic tank legislation has attracted intense scrutiny. Robinson’s HB 85 is among the most lobbied bills in the Legislature, with 100 different lobbyist appearance forms filed in the House. Entities ranging from the Association of Florida Community Developers to the Florida Association of Realtors and a range of city governments have weighed in to sway lawmakers on the bill.

The septic tank proposal illustrates why it can be so hard to address water quality issues in Florida.

The Legislature approved septic tank inspection legislation back in 2010, but it was repealed the next year under former Gov.

Rick Scott after pushback from homeowners and industry groups. Since then lawmakers have tried to get the bill passed again to no avail.

Fine carried the septic tank bill in 2017.

“Two years ago there were certain industry groups that were very, very opposed to the bill,” Fine said.

Realtors worried that homes could become more difficult to sell if they failed septic tank inspections. There also were concerns raised by individual homeowners about the cost of the inspections and replacing failed septic systems or hooking up to central sewer.

“We simply can’t go and impose upon all of these people in all of their homes some tremendous cost to have to tie in to a different system,” House Speaker Jose Oliva said last week.

Clemons and his counterpart in the Senate, Environment and Natural Resources Committee Chair Bill Montford, both say they are continuing to look at the septic issue.

But Montford said, “We have to be reasonable about it.”

Agricultural role

Montford, D-Tallahassee, represents rural areas in the Panhandle where he said the cost of replacing a septic system can be more than the value of someone’s home.

Yet Florida’s 2.6 million septic tanks represent a huge threat to water quality.

Florida Atlantic University research scientist Brian Lapointe testified before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Environment and General Government in January that

much of the state's water quality problems are related to septic tanks.

Nearly four in 10 Florida residents rely on a septic tank, and many of these tanks are failing, leaching nutrients into groundwater that migrate into surface water.

"Septic systems are one of the leading sources of pollution in many water systems in Florida and need to be addressed," Sen. Debbie Mayfield, R-Rockledge, wrote in a recent op-ed that cited Lapointe's research.

While there is GOP support for cracking down on municipal sewage spills and, to some degree, septic tanks, there has been less talk about regulating farm runoff, whether it is fertilizer or animal waste, both of which feed algae blooms.

Another issue that has not garnered much attention is urban stormwater runoff, which can carry lawn fertilizer and other nutrients into waterways. State Rep. Margaret Good, D-Siesta Key, has yet to get a hearing on her proposal to tighten stormwater regulations.

Some also would like to see a broader discussion about growth management. Many legislative leaders oppose the idea of reining in growth, even as Florida's population continues to increase at a rapid pace, straining the state's natural resources.

But with DeSantis campaigning aggressively against Big Sugar, the lack of attention to agriculture as a culprit in degraded water quality is conspicuous.

Some environmentalists see the focus on human waste as partly an effort to change the subject from agriculture, which has strong support among many Republicans in the Legislature.

"There is an element of that," Sierra Club lobbyist David Cullen

said of the Legislature's unwillingness to confront agriculture interests. "And there is also a recognition on the part of politicians that people think the problem is septic tanks and therefore that's what they're going to talk about... but at the same time they don't want to do anything that's going to cost anyone who has a septic tank any money."

Farms are getting some degree of scrutiny. The biosolids bill that advanced last week would tighten permitting requirements on the spreading of human waste on farm fields. But biosolids are just one component of how farms can impact water quality.

Clemons said farmers have been the "bogeyman" for many environmental groups "but when you have empirical data that has been produced by the Department of Environmental Protection that says our local governments and their utilities have dumped almost a million gallons of sewage into our waterways that's not insignificant."

Sen. Ben Albritton, a Republican citrus farmer from Wauchula who sits on both environmental committees in the Senate and is heavily involved in such issues, also defended the agriculture industry, saying farmers have "been utilizing best management practices for years."

But Albritton added that everything is on the table this year when it comes to addressing nutrient pollution.

Environmentalists frequently say they want the Legislature to look beyond a single source of pollution and develop broad water quality rules that look at farms, lawns, septic tanks, sewage pipes and other sources of excess nutrients.

"We need a holistic, comprehensive approach in the entire state of Florida," said Jacksonville resident Lisa Rinaman, who was in Tallahassee last week advocating on behalf of St. Johns

Riverkeeper for tighter rules on biosolids. "Because as we take septic to sewer if you're then just putting the sewage sludge to biosolids on land and it's running off in the waterways it may be a little cleaner, but you're still undermining all the investment that you made."

Albritton said it takes time to develop substantive legislation, and a lot of vetting. He believes lawmakers will get there.

"To take a more holistic approach to this we have to take time as a Legislature to make sure we're not ruled by emotion, we're ruled by data," he said. "The holistic approach is being developed."

*Photo by the Sun.