



# BLUE-GREEN ALGAE ON HIS HANDS

## The Failure of Governor DeSantis to Protect Florida's Waters and Tourism Economy

Florida is a top destination for visitors from around the world for a good reason. Our sandy beaches, iconic marine and coastal wildlife, and glistening waterways have attracted hundreds of millions of tourists and new residents for over a century. But in recent years, those prized waterways have turned into a sludge factory full of death and destruction.

For decades, lawmakers have allowed pollution from agricultural runoff, dirty stormwater, septic tanks, wastewater spills, and unfettered development to destroy our beaches, springs, rivers, lakes, and streams. Climate change is only making things worse.

Toxic algal blooms are most common in the warm and rainy summer season. Heavy rains wash pollutants like nitrogen and phosphorus off the land, feeding algae. With a steady source of "food" from pollution, small blooms can turn into massive ecosystem-wide crises, covering once pristine waterbodies in guacamole-like slime. Blue-green algae blocks sunlight from reaching the seafloor, killing native seagrasses - an important habitat and food source for marine animals like manatees and sea turtles. Warmer water temperatures (made worse by the climate crisis) also encourage algae growth.

Blue-green algae kills fish and marine life both directly and indirectly. Toxins in the algae are released when they die and can kill fish and mammals when ingested. As the algae die, they also consume oxygen, leading to less oxygen in the water available for fish. Lacking seagrass, manatees die of starvation. The cumulative result is thousands of dead fish, marine mammals, sea turtles, and birds that wash up on the coast and clog canals, causing a horrific sight and smell.

People and pets are not immune to these unsightly, foul-smelling outbreaks. Contact with or ingestion can kill pets. In humans, it can cause sicknesses ranging from skin rashes and respiratory and gastrointestinal distress to liver or kidney damage and even death. Water blanketed with algae suffocates marine life. This death and decay, as well as bad press, cause local restaurants, hotels, and businesses to lose customers or even close down permanently.

Nowhere has the devastation been more evident than in our coastal estuaries, like the Indian River Lagoon on the east coast. Estuaries serve as nurseries for fish and wildlife and historically have supported tens of thousands of acres of seagrass. Over the past decade, Blue-Green algae and poor water quality has destroyed over 46,000 acres of seagrass in the Indian River Lagoon alone. This ecosystem collapse caused a record 1,101 manatee deaths in 2021, as these marine mammals rely on seagrass as their primary food source.



# CLEAN WATER OR GREEN WATER?

Ron DeSantis began his term as Governor in January 2019, winning his election with a margin of less than 0.2%. With the backdrop of one of the worst water quality crises in recent memory, he campaigned with a promise to address our water quality problems once and for all. In his first week in office, Governor DeSantis issued [Executive Order #19-12](#), establishing the Blue-Green Algae Task Force. The Governor charged this Task Force with developing recommendations to reduce toxic blue-green algae.

The newly-established Blue-Green Algae Task Force, composed of water scientists from around the state, met numerous times and issued its consensus document of recommendations in October 2019, focused on actionable ways to prevent pollution at the source and invest our tax dollars strategically. **The prescription to save Florida's waters has never been more clearly articulated to a sitting Governor in Florida's history.**

Since then, there have been three full legislative sessions (and numerous special sessions), yet the Governor and legislative leaders have only enacted a small handful of those vital recommendations.

Governor DeSantis failed to deliver on his promises and failed to listen to his appointed team of water quality experts. While he widely touts himself as a "green" Governor, DeSantis has paid lip service to the majority of chronic water quality and human health concerns plaguing our state. Under his reign, the only thing that is green is our water.

Using the Blue-Green Algae Task Force recommendations as a guide, the Governor **FAILS** on **28 of 32** key metrics. The analysis compares policies and rulemaking included in SB 712 (2020) and other legislation passed between 2020-2022 with the commonsense recommendations from the Blue-Green Algae Task Force in 2019. The most significant and egregious failures were related to Basin Management Action Plans; agriculture and Best Management Practices, septic system, sanitary sewer overflows, and stormwater systems; and protecting public health.

**GRADE: F - 12.5%**

## Governor Ron DeSantis' Top 5 Notable Failures to Protect Our Water:

- NO statewide septic inspection program
- NO water quality standards for toxic algae blooms
- NO mandatory public health notifications for toxic blooms
- NO water quality testing required for enrolled agricultural polluters
- NOT ENOUGH state resources for pollution prevention



# LIST OF NOTABLE FAILURES

## Basin Management Action Plans:

- No strategic approach to project selection, implementation, and monitoring
- No new storage and treatment infrastructure
- No consideration for growth projections, despite massive population growth and greater intensity of agriculture
- No acknowledgment of the needs of downstream waterbodies
- No provision for addressing legacy pollutant sources or removal
- No consideration for maximizing taxpayer resources through prioritization of projects, monitoring, or modeling effectiveness of projects

## Agriculture and Best Management Practices:

- No water quality monitoring [required](#) for agriculture enrolled in Best Management Practices program
- No ledger of projected and actual load reductions
- No revision of BMP manuals, despite new legislation allowing additional fertilizer usage on citrus
- Inadequate funding for BMP program and monitoring

## Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal Systems:

- No statewide septic inspection program
- No restrictions on new septic systems on small lots (<1 acre) outside of Outstanding Florida Springs watersheds
- Inadequate funding for septic-to-sewer conversion

## Sanitary Sewer Overflows:

- No required backup power for lift stations
- No adopted programs to minimize infiltration from lateral lines
- Inadequate funding to upgrade failing wastewater infrastructure

## Stormwater Treatment Systems:

- No statewide stormwater inspection program to identify and address failing systems
- Antiquated design criteria for stormwater systems
- Inadequate staffing and funding to fix failing stormwater system

## Innovative Technologies and Applications and Funding:

- Inadequate focus on pollution prevention

## Blue-Green Algae Blooms and Public Health:

- No water quality standards for cyanotoxins
- No health advisories specifically for Blue-Green Algae, despite its toxicity
- No required public notification for blue-green algae or other human contaminants, such as fecal matter