

Experts: Cleaner water is 'going to take time'

Max Chesnes

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Want clean water? Be patient, it takes time.

That's the message from Florida's top water quality experts tasked with recommending solutions to curb the toxic algae bloom crisis that regularly threatens both coasts.

Chief Science Officer Mark Rains, appointed by Gov. Ron DeSantis, said he's largely satisfied with the state's progress in cleaning Florida waterways. That's despite an Aug. 3 report that underscores how little has been done to curb toxic algae blooms and the pollution that ignites them, according to a coalition of 12 environmental nonprofits.

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The solutions are multiyear, multifaceted and cost multimillions, said Rains, head of the Blue-Green Algae Task Force that DeSantis created in 2019. The pollution problem has been brewing for 175 years, and results won't happen overnight, Rains said.

"As we're continuing to make progress, I'm not overly concerned about where we are today — I'm concerned about what we do tomorrow," Rains told TCPalm after a task force meeting in Fort Pierce on Aug. 4, the day after the coalition released its report.

In the nearly three years since the task force made its science-based recommendations in October 2019, about 12.5% of the ideas have been fully adopted — either by new laws or stricter enforcement measures, according to the coalition report.

Also in that time: A record number of manatees have starved from seagrass loss. Toxic algae has plagued Lake Okeechobee and both coasts. In Indian River County, toxic algae polluted Blue Cypress Lake in 2018 and the Stick Marsh in 2018, 2019 and 2022.

Florida Legislature and BMAPs

In the last two legislative sessions, lawmakers didn't pass several bills that would have directly adopted some task force recommendations, such as:

- More robust water quality monitoring



An alligator navigates stagnant water smothered in toxic blue-green algae inside the Pahokee Marina on April 28, 2021. The solutions are multiyear, multifaceted and cost multimillions, said Mark Rains, head of the Blue-Green Algae Task Force that Gov. Ron DeSantis created in 2019. The pollution problem has been brewing for 175 years, and results won't happen overnight, Rains said. LEAH VOSS/TCPALM

- Periodic inspections of sewage treatment systems

- An update of the state's flagship pollution-reduction plan, called Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs), to account for Florida's population boom.

Not enough is being done to improve BMAPs, the report says. A TCPalm investigation used state data to show BMAPs are ineffective, especially for

Lake Okeechobee.

Treasure Coast lawmakers admitted BMAPs aren't working, but none tried to improve it during this year's session. The task force gave lawmakers a C average on their work.

Population boom, climate change

There's still more work to be done,

said Rains, a University of South Florida ecohydrologist and professor in the School of Geosciences.

"The (restoration) target keeps changing. The Florida population keeps increasing by 1,000 people a day. The climate is changing," Rains told the task force during its Aug. 4 meeting. "It's going to take time. ... We're talking about decades."

James Sullivan, a task force member and executive director of Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce, agreed.

"There's obviously more that can always be done," he said. "That's true no matter what."

Is Florida gaining or losing ground on waterway cleanup with the spike in development and more people moving to the state? Sullivan didn't get a clear answer at the task force meeting when he asked Kevin Coyne, the Department of Environmental Protection's BMAP program administrator.

"We are working to get things in place to assist with that," Coyne said.

When lawmakers don't act, the public should engage, Sullivan said. They need to pressure their local, state and federal officials to make clean water a priority.

"The task force is not a governing body. We have no power with the Legislature; we make recommendations," Sullivan told TCPalm. "It's really up to the public to put the pressure on their representatives and senators to make them do what we say."

Max Chesnes is a TCPalm environment reporter. Email him at max.chesnes@tcpalm.com.